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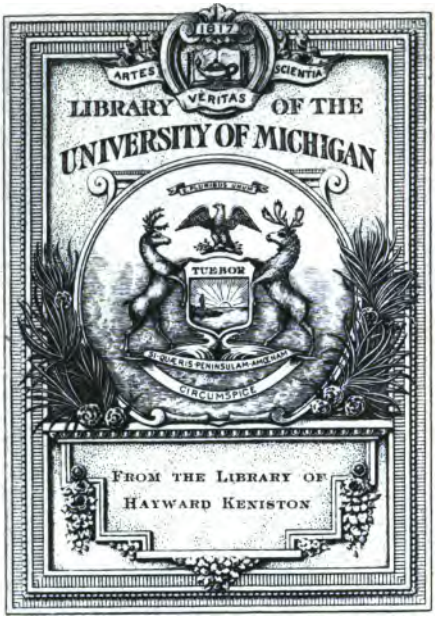

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MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP

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BY

MARGUERITE AUDOUX

TRANSLATED BY

F. S. FLINT

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MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP

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MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP

I

On that day, as on every other morning when the time to start work was near, the Avenue du Maine was crowded with people walking hurriedly and with overloaded trams rolling swiftly towards the center of Paris.

In spite of the crowd, I saw Sandrine immediately. She, too, was stepping out and I had to run to catch her up.

It was Monday. Our summer slackness was coming to an end, and we were returning to the workshop to begin the winter season.

Bouledogue and little Duretour were waiting for us on the pavement, and big Bergeounette, whom we could see coming along on the opposite side, crossed the avenue, without heeding the traffic, in order to be with us sooner.

For several minutes there was gay gossip in our group. Then the four stories were climbed quickly. And, while the others took their old places round the table, I went and sat in front of the sewing-machine, near the window. Bouledogue was the last to be seated. She blew through her nose as her habit was, and immediately her work was handed to her she said: "Now we must work hard to please everybody."

The *patronne's*[1] husband looked at her very narrowly, and replied, "Eh bé. . . . You don't say you're going to start grousing already!"

He it was who always distributed praise or blame. For that reason, the girls called him the *patron,* while they called their mistress Mme. Dalignac whenever they spoke of her.

Bouledogue grumbled at everything and nothing. When she was displeased, she had a way of crinkling her nose which raised her lip and disclosed all her teeth, which were strong and white.

It often happened that the *patron* came to words with her; but Mme. Dalignac always restored peace by saying softly to them, "Now then . . . do be quiet."

The *patron's* angers were not in the least like Bouledogue's. They had gone as soon as they had come. Without hint or warning, he hurled himself at the girl who was to be taken to task, and for a whole minute he shouted himself to the choking point, swallowing half the words he had to say.

This habit of his irritated big Bergeounette, who took no notice of him and muttered beneath her breath, "What gibberish!"

The *patron* was the first to laugh at his own outbursts, and as if to excuse them, he used to say, "I am quick-tempered." And he added sometimes with a touch of pride, "I came from the Pyrénées, I did."

He it was who machine-embroidered the mantles and

[1] *Patron* and *patronne* mean *master* and *mistress;* there are no just English equivalents.

gowns of our customers. He was skillful and extremely careful, but after a few hours' work he used to go quite yellow and to seem broken down with fatigue.

His wife would touch him on the shoulder, and say, "Have a rest."

He would then stop his heavy machine and push back his stool, in order to lean against the wall, and he would remain a long while without stirring or speaking.

Between the *patrons* and the girls there was a sort of friendly understanding. Mme. Dalignac was not afraid of asking advice of the workshop, and the girls gave her all their confidence.

As for the *patron,* if he shouted at the top of his voice to give us the slightest explanation, he spoke in quite a different manner to his wife. He asked her advice on the most trifling things, and never did anything to vex her.

Mme. Dalignac was a little older than her husband. This could be seen from her hair, which was beginning to go gray at the temples; but her face remained young, and her laugh was as fresh as a young girl's.

She was tall and also well-made, but you had to look at her closely to perceive this, so unobtrusive and far-away she always seemed. She spoke softly and deliberately; and if she happened to be compelled to blame any one, she blushed and stammered as if she were herself the guilty person.

The *patron* cherished his wife with a tenderness full of admiration, and he often used to say to us, "There's nobody like her."

Whenever she went outdoors, he would stand at the window to see her cross from one pavement to the other, and, if she were late in returning, he would watch for her and become uneasy.

At these times, the girls knew quite well that he must not be asked for anything.

To-day the hope of work brought joy into the workshop. We could talk of nothing else but of a new customer whose payments would be certain, because she had a large business, and who would give us a lot of work because she had five daughters.

The *patron* was urging his wife to go and fetch some materials which had been announced.

"Quick, quick," he said. And he danced about so agitatedly that he knocked up against the dummies and the stools. Mme. Dalignac laughed and everybody did the same.

The sun, too, seemed to be laughing with us. It shone through the window, and tried to rest on the cotton-basket and the sewing-machine. Its heat was still very mild, and Bergeounette opened the window wide to let it enter at its pleasure.

On the other side of the avenue, the walls of a house which was being built were beginning to rise from the earth. The noises of stone and wood mingled together as they mounted up to us, and the red and blue belts of the masons could be seen among the scaffoldings.

Each moment a tumbril of rubble or of sand would be emptied. The rubble rolled over with a thin noise, and the slipping of the sand made you think of the summer

wind in the foliage of the chestnut trees. Then trucks laden with hewn stone arrived. You could hear them coming in the distance. The drivers shouted, whips cracked, and the horses drew heavily on their collars.

Immediately his wife had set out, the *patron* made little Duretour help him to clear the shelves of bits of material, and to put things in some sort of order.

Little Duretour was not a very good needle-woman, in spite of her eighteen years; but Mme. Dalignac kept her because of her great gayety. She always looked at things on the right side, and her high spirits often prevented us from feeling our fatigue.

It was she who ran errands, and who opened the door to customers. She was slightly built, and her hair was so carelessly arranged that many took her for an apprentice. This annoyed her a little, and made her say, "When I'm married they'll still take me for a little girl."

Her sweetheart was not much older than she was. Each evening he came and waited for her at the door, and the two of them took up no more room on the pavement than one person.

She was now emptying the drawers and brushing the shelves. From time to time she threw a parcel into the air and caught it like a ball, or else she amused herself by distorting the names of the customers and making reverences to the dummies. Mmes. Belauzaud and Pellofy especially received her compliments.

"Good morning, Madame Bel-Oiseau! Good morn-

ing, Madame Pelle à feu!" she said, bowing very low and putting on a delighted look.

Our mingled laughter flew out of the window, and the masons opposite raised their heads to see whence it came.

I was the last-comer to the firm. I joined it shortly before the summer dead-season, and although they had all been good comrades to me, shyness prevented me from taking part in their gayety. Yet, since I had been in Paris, it was the first workshop in which I had felt at home. The querulous voice of the *patron* did not frighten me in the least, and the mildness of his wife filled me with tranquillity.

On my arrival the *patron* had immediately cut my name into two.

"Marie Claire," he said, swelling out his cheeks to accentuate his mockery, "two names at once? Eh bé . . . you're a stunner, you are."

And puffing out his breath as if he were driving something too complicated away from him, he had added in a serious voice, "We shall call you Marie. That will be quite sufficient."

But it was not sufficient. I answered to the name so badly that he was compelled in the end to restore it to its first form.

Mme. Dalignac came back sooner than she was expected. She brought with her an enormous cardboard box, the lid of which would not keep down in spite of the strings that held it.

The *patron* hastened to open it. He touched the tissues with a little grimace of pleasure.

"Silk, nothing but silk," he said. His wife pushed him away.

"Leave it alone. . . . You'll mix it all up." Then, turning to us, "It is for a marriage," she said.

She made certain that the box rested wholly on the table, and then took out one by one the pieces of material, indicating the employment of each.

"A black gown for the mother of the bride. Two blue dresses for the grown-up sisters. . . . Pink dresses for the little sisters. . . . And black lace and white lace, and pieces of ribbon and taffeta for the linings, and satins for the petticoats. . . ."

With great precaution she took out the last tissue carefully folded in paper.

"And here's *crêpe de Chine* for the bride's gown."

And without stopping to take off her cloak, she drew up a dummy, and, taking up the materials, she began to drape them round the bust. She unfolded the laces and arranged them. She made loops of the ribbons on her fingers, and pinned them on. Then she flung the lot on the table, which was soon nothing but a confusion of every color.

My four companions had stopped sewing, and were looking on with interest. Their eyes passed from one color to another, and they stretched out their hands to touch the laces and the silky tissues.

Suddenly the clock began to chime. Bouledogue got up and said sulkily, "It's twelve o'clock."

So it was, but the morning had passed so quickly that dinner-time had come without our being aware of it.

The others laid down their work, and got up slowly and as if regretfully.

The afternoon was full of high spirits. Duretour, mounted on a stool, was covering the shelves with a gray paper which the *patron* passed up to her after having cut strips of the proper size.

When the *patron* did not hand up the strips quickly enough, Duretour took advantage of the moment's interval to turn and dance on her stool; then she opened and shut her arms, shouting like a market-woman, "Robes and mantles, robes and mantles."

This made us laugh, and the *patron* said with an indulgent air, "If there were only you to make them, my poor Duretour, we shouldn't go far."

The masons opposite whistled like free birds. They had at last discovered our workshop, and they were doing everything they could to attract our attention. One of them called out all the names of girls he could think of, while another struck an iron frame with a heavy hammer. And every time that laughter broke out or that one of us showed herself a little at the window, the calls redoubled, and the frame sounded like a bell.

Towards the evening the *patron's* sister entered the workshop. She was a bold-looking woman. She, too, was a dressmaker, and she was called Mme. Doublé.

She sat down on the *patron's* stool.

"You've all started work already," she said in a contemptuous tone.

"I am certain that you yourself haven't stopped resting," her brother replied, annoyed.

She made the gesture of throwing something over her shoulder.

"Oh, I do the same as my customers; I go to the seaside, and I only came back this morning."

The *patron* showed her the tissues.

"We have some orders," he said.

Mme. Doublé became attentive, and her eyebrows came together.

She had black eyes like her brother's, but her look was full of boldness and firmness. Her mouth, too, reminded you of her brother's, but her lips seemed made of some hard matter which prevented them from stretching into a smile.

As she entered, Mme. Dalignac's face had changed in expression. Still cutting her taffeta, she bit at her lip as people do who are worried by something, and you heard more plainly the sharp, grating noise of her scissors.

"Anyhow," went on Mme. Doublé, "you're mad, Baptiste, to have all your girls at the beginning of the season."

She pointed at me with her finger. "You had no need to take on that one."

The *patron* seemed embarrassed.

"She has to earn her living like the rest of us," he replied, without looking at me.

"Eh, yes, poor Baptiste," she said, tapping her brother on the shoulder, "but *I* prefer the money in my pocket rather than in other people's." She spoke the words in a kind of sing-song.

Bouledogue and Sandrine lowered their heads and sewed more quickly. Little Duretour had become serious, and I felt uneasy myself, which made me strongly desire the departure of Mme. Doublé. Big Bergeounette alone seemed to show no fear, and continued her interest in the masons opposite, who were making a great noise on leaving their work.

The *patron* tried to turn the conversation, but his sister always came back to the same subject. She thought that Mme. Dalignac lacked firmness with her customers and severity with her work-girls. She asked for precise details about the work, and found fault with everything.

The *patron* began at last to show irritation.

"My wife is not a policeman, like you," he said.

And Mme. Doublé, who had the same accent as her brother, replied, "Eh bé . . . So much the worse for that then."

And she stood upright, looking insolently round on everybody.

"It's seven o'clock, Bouledogue," said Mme. Dalignac suddenly.

It was probably the first time that Bouledogue had forgotten the clock. She got up quickly and undid her apron, before she put away her work. The others also got up hastily. They went through the door without

making a sound. But they were scarcely outside before you could hear them tumbling down the staircase as if they were flying from danger.

I found them below, grouped round the entrance as they had been in the morning; but their faces were very different. The pretty eyes of little Duretour were sparkling with anger.

"She's spoiled our nice day for us," she said.

"She's very hard on her girls," Sandrine affirmed, coming up to me.

She came closer still and lowered her voice.

"She'll come back, you see, when the marriage dresses are finished. Every season she comes and takes our prettiest models, and she boasts that she makes her customers pay dear for them."

Big Bergeounette laughed funnily, and said in the air, without caring whether she was heard or not, "There's no one like her for raking in the money."

"I wouldn't work for her," growled Bouledogue, showing her teeth, "even if I was starving."

The arrival of Duretour's sweetheart compelled us to separate, and each of us went off bearing her grudge.

II

October had come. The bridal dresses were being finished one by one, and soon there was only the white robe to be made at the last moment in order to preserve all its freshness.

Sandrine and Bouledogue had this work to do. Mme. Dalignac gave them white aprons which covered them down to the ground, and they took their places for the time being at the end of the table.

Mme. Doublé came back as Sandrine had predicted. She twirled with her thumb the dummies on which the dresses were, and after having penciled their lines on a slip of paper, she left the workshop as she had entered it, without saying a word.

"She takes us for dogs," growled the voice of Bouledogue behind her.

At the same moment Duretour turned her nose up to the ceiling.

"G' morning, Ma'am," she said in a little fluted voice.

The shelves were now overflowing with materials, and the laughter of the first days had ceased. On leaving at night, there was no more time spent in chatter in the light of the gas-lamps. Bergeounette, who also was in a hurry, did not always go off in the direction of her home, and Duretour, pressed up against her

sweetheart, dragged him swiftly towards the Rue de la Gaîté.

Sandrine lived in a street neighboring mine, and we went up a part of the Avenue du Maine together. Once she left me to run up to her Jacques, who had come to meet her.

I had often heard speak of Sandrine's Jacques, as Bergeounette called him. But when I saw him he made me think of something unfinished. He was much taller than Sandrine. Yet when she took his arm in hers, it seemed to me that she could easily have carried him like a little child.

Jacques and Sandrine were not engaged, like little Duretour and her mechanic. They were lovers who had always loved each other.

Sandrine's mother had brought them up together, and for a long time they had believed that they were brother and sister. Then Jacques' parents had taken their son away to put him to college. But they sent him back every year to spend his holiday in the little village. Thus, when Sandrine at the age of twenty had come to Paris to look for work, she was already the mother of a little girl.

She had confessed it without fear or shame to Mme. Dalignac. And immediately she had asked to be allowed to take work home in the evening in order to increase her earnings.

She knew her trade thoroughly. She was gentle and gay. And from the first Mme. Dalignac had been her friend.

Since then another child had come to her, a little boy who was nearing his third year, and whom the grandmother was bringing up in the country with the little girl.

Jacques was a cashier in a big bank. He lived with his mother, whom he supported now that his father was dead, but he spent all his evenings with Sandrine, adding columns of figures that never ended. They used the same table and the same lamp, and both of them worked courageously until midnight to earn enough to pay for the keep of their little ones.

For the moment there was a change in their intimacy. Jacques no longer came to meet Sandrine, and he left her working alone in her little room. Sandrine was not upset. Jacques had told her that he was obliged to remain with his mother, who was very unwell, and this explanation was sufficient. She remained calm and happy, as if she had been Jacques' legal wife.

"I know quite well that my Jacques will never be able to marry me," she said, with a smile full of confidence. "But I also know quite well that nothing can separate us."

I owed it to her that I had been able to start with Mme. Dalignac. Chance had brought us together one Sunday on a seat on the boulevard. We had spoken about needlework, and she had suggested that I should take the position of machinist which was vacant in her workshop.

I, too, had at once taken her as a friend. I did not know whether she herself felt drawn towards me; for

she seemed indifferent to everything except her Jacques and her children. But when she looked at me, she always had the air of offering me something.

On the day fixed for the marriage of our young customer, Sandrine put the gown into a cardboard box, in order to go and dress the bride herself, and to make certain that nothing had been forgotten. She loved this kind of work, and Mme. Dalignac knew that she would do it thoroughly. Therefore, she merely showed her the way to arrange the veil in the latest fashion. Above all, the crown of orange-blossom must hold the fold of tulle well back.

"Look . . . like this."

And Mme. Dalignac draped Duretour's hair with a stiff muslin, and picked up anywhere a strip of cloth, which she rolled round her forehead like a crown.

Sandrine did not, like us, laugh at Duretour's indignant air. She followed Mme. Dalignac's movements attentively, and, when she had herself turned a certain fold beneath the strip of cloth, she set out lightly and full of assurance.

We always relaxed a little when an important order had been finished. Bouledogue took her time over things. The *patron* folded his arms, and Bergeounette looked out of the window rather more than was necessary.

After Sandrine, Bergeounette was the senior girl. She had taken up her place in front of the window, and would not give it up to anybody.

The *patron* used to assert that she made signs to a one-armed man who passed by on the opposite side of the road, but Mme. Dalignac said that that did not prevent her from sewing very quickly and very well.

Nobody knew the real name of Bergeounette and nobody troubled about it.

The first day she entered the workshop she refused to do her work in the firm's way, maintaining that her own way was quite as good. The *patron,* who did not like being thwarted, had lost his temper, and shouted at her that she was as pig-headed as a Breton woman.

"I am one," she immediately answered with pride, sitting up erect. "I am a real Barzounette."

"How do you say it?" the *patron* laughed at her.

But Bergeounette had defied him.

"I say it like that, monsieur," she said. "And you can't repeat it, because people from the south can never pronounce the word."

The *patron* had laughed instead of showing annoyance, and he had yielded to her obstinacy, calling her "headstrong Bergeounette."

She continued to show the same obstinacy in everything that did not fall in with her ideas. The infuriated shouting of the *patron* and mild remonstrances of his wife made no impression on her, and in the end it was always necessary to yield to her.

Apart from this defect, which often led to disputes, she was always ready to help others. Moreover, she was even-tempered, and was never quarrelsome. Her

greatest joy was to have listeners when she spoke of her beloved Brittany.

"The moors are gray," she would say, "but the gorse in flower is yellower than the broom."

She spoke of the sea as of a person whom she had loved tenderly.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I used to run down to the rocks to see it better, and when it began to foam, I thought it was dressing itself for a celebration, and that all the waves were following it in procession."

On days of high winds, Bergeounette was filled with real anxiety.

"There are fishing boats along the coast," she never failed to remind us.

Sometimes she opened the window, and looked at the sky as if to seek there the boats which were in danger. Then she stared a long time at the clouds, and often, as she sat down again, she sang in a slow, far-away voice —

"D'où viens-tu, beau nuage,
Apporté par le vent?
Viens-tu de cette plage
Que je vois en rêvant?"[1]

Our gayety left us abruptly on the return of Sandrine. She came back from our customer's with a face so upset that everybody thought that something had happened to the wedding-gown.

[1] "Whence come you, lovely cloud, brought by the wind? Do you come from that shore which I see when dreaming?"

The *patron* and his wife did not dare to question her. They waited for what she had to say, but she passed in front of them without speaking, and, instead of sitting down, she remained standing near her stool.

Her shoulders were huddled up, and her eyes had widened so that it hurt to look at her. And suddenly she turned to the wall to rest her forehead against it.

At that the *patron* could hold himself in no longer. He rushed at her and shouted in her ears, "The dress? The dress?"

Sandrine's eyes passed over him and us, and she spoke immediately. She spoke with vehemence; and what she had to say was so entangled that it seemed as though nobody would ever understand anything of it at all. However, she stopped. Everybody knew that the dress fitted well, that the veil had been arranged in the new fashion, and that poor Sandrine had just learned that her Jacques had married a week ago a young, well-to-do woman.

There was a sort of dismay which seemed to command silence. Then the *patron* lowered his head and retreated to his stool, while his wife advanced slowly towards Sandrine, as if drawn to her against her will.

It was Bouledogue who broke the silence by hurling insulting words at the absent Jacques. Bergeounette shook her shoulders as if trying to throw off a cloak that irked her. Little Duretour began to weep aloud. And when at length I turned once more to the sewing-machine, I perceived that I was hugging the oil-can

against my chest, and that the oil was falling drop by drop on to my clothes.

It was at Jacques' mother's that Sandrine had learned her misfortune. As the old lady had always been friendly to her, she had not been able to resist the desire, when passing her house, to go in and inquire after her health. But there, instead of a sick woman, she had found a gay and healthy person, who had said to her immediately, "Jacques has made a fine marriage."

And after having enlarged at length on the happiness of her son and the beauty of her daughter-in-law, she had gently sent Sandrine off.

"Run and dress your young bride," she had said.

Sandrine wept the whole day through. She screamed like a little child, and her sorrow seemed to us so great that we could find nothing to say to her.

She stopped now and then to repeat in tones full of anguish, "Why, oh why?"

Indeed, the evening before Jacques had spent a few moments in her little room, and he had gone away with a photograph of the children. And Sandrine's forehead wrinkled up, and her look seemed to turn inwards, as if to ransack her memory.

"Why, oh why?"

She finally went to sleep against the wall, and the noise of the stools did not awaken her when the girls left for the evening.

I remained behind to await her awakening in order to take her home. Mme. Dalignac was talking of drag-

ging out the chair-bedstead from its corner, and of preparing a bed in the workshop.

Sandrine was awakened by the noise of the door-bell. It was Jacques, who had come to make inquiries. He looked frightened, and he had on neither hat nor overcoat, in spite of the wet and the cold.

Sandrine trembled all over when she saw him, and he, as he came forward, seemed to be imploring for pity.

"My Sandrine!" he said.

And Sandrine, stretching out both her hands as if to protect him, replied immediately, "My Jacques."

Jacques' face expressed so deep an affection that it came into my mind that nothing had changed between them. But that soon passed away, for both began to weep most woefully.

Sandrine did not reproach him.

"How am I going to bring up the children?" was all she said through her tears.

Jacques tried to speak too, but the words he had to say would not leave his mouth.

His voice stopped at the bottom of his throat, and he squeezed his sweetheart's hands more tightly as if that were enough to make himself understood. Then he began to pull at the back of a chair the legs of which were caught in the cross-beam of the table. He pulled hard, and when he had succeeded in dragging away the chair, he breathed with satisfaction, as if he had just done some absolutely necessary thing. Shortly afterwards his frightened air came back, and he looked in

the direction of the door with a movement that made him strain his back.

Sandrine did not seek to detain him, but, as he was leaving her to go back to his new wife, she smoothed out with the tips of her fingers the cracks formed by the folds in the front of his shirt.

On the morrow nobody saw her weep.

But she retained a convulsive movement which pulled her mouth harshly. And at all times her eyes would wander round the work-shop as if seeking for some lost object.

III

All Saints' Day was approaching, and all our customers were demanding their clothes for that day. An activity full of dread filled the workshop. Mme. Dalignac distributed the work with a careworn forehead, and the instructions she gave in an absent-minded way were not always understood. Bergeounette, who no longer allowed herself time to look through the window, took badly any remarks about her work; and Duretour, who could laugh no longer, began to cry at the slightest reproach. Bouledogue growled, and said that we were doing the work of two days in one. Nobody answered her, but the jumpiness increased. A reel of cotton would roll under the table, or a pair of scissors fall noisily to the floor.

Bouledogue never arrived late at the workshop, but she never gave a minute longer to her work than was due from her. At noon or on the stroke of seven, she got up from her stool, and if one of us lingered to finish a few sitches, she looked at her crossly and said, "One day's work's enough."

She was now in an endless bad temper, and she bullied everybody. Mme Dalignac tried to soothe her.

"Come, Bouledogue," she said, "a little more heart to it, and we shall soon be less busy."

But Bouledogue, instead of being soothed, reared up and replied very loudly, "If you didn't always say Yes to your customers, they would be obliged to wait until their dresses were ready."

She sat down, trembling a little.

"I, too," she added, "would like a new dress for All Saints' Day. Yet I've got to go without one."

The *patron* could hold himself no longer. He rushed at Bouledogue.

"My wife is a saint!" he shouted at her full in the face. "Do you hear?"

And Bouledogue, who was not yet appeased, replied by pushing him away with her elbow.

"I know it," she said.

When Bouledogue was angry, her voice seemed to mount up from the depths of her being. She reverberated rumblingly, and reminded you of an ax striking an oak. The *patron* was intimidated by it, and Bergeounette, who feared nothing and nobody, held her peace at such times.

On the following day, Sandrine did not turn up. Mme. Dalignac perceived immediately that she was not in her place. And as none of us knew the cause of her absence, she talked of sending some one to her house, fearing that she might be ill.

Big Bergeounette was already taking off her apron; but the *patron* bore her down strongly by the shoulders to make her keep her place.

"Bergeounette," he said, "has always one foot in the air ready to run out."

He himself thought that Sandrine was only late, and that she would arrive in a minute or two.

The fear that Sandrine might be ill came to me too. For two days past, she had had a heavy cold, and the evening before, when returning home in the rain, she had had great difficulty in walking up the avenue with her parcel of work, which, however, was not very heavy.

I wanted to tell Mme. Dalignac this, but little Duretour was explaining how she had almost stayed away herself, because her betrothed had wished to leave her.

Her voice rang with laughter, and the *patron* put on a voice full of pitying mockery.

"Poor little thing," he said, forcing his accent, "at least, you kept your man?"

"He is as obstinate as I am," said Duretour. "He wanted to walk along the Avenue du Maine, and I wanted to go along the Boulevard Montparnasse. Then he lost his temper. He took his arm away from my waist, and off he went as fast as his legs could carry him."

"And you ran behind him like a little dog?" said the *patron* once more.

"Oh, no," replied Duretour. "When I saw that he was really off for good, I lost my head, and shouted out, 'Stop thief'!"

Nobody felt like laughing. We were thinking of Sandrine and the urgent work, and Duretour did not dare to tell the end of her story.

Sandrine arrived at the moment when everybody had stopped thinking about her.

She came to ask for permission to rest all day. Her excuse was that she felt feverish, and that it was impossible for her to work. Her eyes were shining and her lips red, but her face seemed to have shrunk.

Almost immediately she had a fit of coughing. You might have said that she had something cracked in her throat, and Duretour cried out to her, "Stop, stop! You are coughing like an old gentleman."

Sandrine began laughing in spite of her cough. Then she said, striking her chest with her clenched fist, "It's the first time that a cold has hurt me so much."

As soon as she had gone, Mme. Dalignac began to get uneasy about her, and the *patron* grumbled, "It would be the last straw if she went and fell ill."

On the following day she was still away, and Duretour, who had gone to make inquiries, reported that the fever had increased, and that Sandrine was unable to get up.

Mme. Dalignac's eyes stayed for a long moment on the half-finished dresses which lay about everywhere. And the *patron* began to talk of taking on another girl to replace Sandrine. But his wife stopped him from worrying himself further by saying, "I'll work every evening until midnight, that's all."

She added, with a slightly embarrassed air, turning to us: "If one of you would like to do the same, we'll keep company."

Nobody answered. But in the evening, as the clock struck nine, Bergeounette arrived at the same time as

I did. And almost immediately Bouledogue entered as well.

The *patron* was very much surprised to see her. He could not believe that she wanted to work late too.

"Oh, it's for Sandrine," replied Bouledogue in her ungracious way.

And every one began work in silence.

The *patron* had taken a corner of the table. He began to draw an embroidery trimming for a mantle, and although his crayon often broke in his fingers, he did not fret about it as was usual.

The following evenings were more animated.

Bouledogue and the *patron* squabbled with one another, or else Bergeounette complained of the unbearable life she was leading at home.

Bergeounette's complaints always had something so comical about them that nobody pitied her. Even on the morning when she arrived with a black eye and a bleeding cheek, everybody began to laugh when, in a comically sad tone, she said, "If my husband didn't beat me, I should be the happiest of women."

Sewing quietly in the lamplight, she always managed to forget her troubles, and no evening came to an end without her having spoken at length about the sea and her Brittany.

She often repeated the same things, but we did not grow tired of hearing them, and it was as though she were beginning again a very beautiful song, when she said, "The sea is a blind and deaf being whose power and strength is limitless. It howls, it strikes, it crushes,

and its waves, hurled at the coasts like mad horsemen, tears them and crumbles them endlessly."

"The sea's a cruel beast," growled Bouledogue with a little fear.

But Bergeounette went on quickly.

"There are days when it is so peaceful and so soft that you want to lie down on it and sleep a long, long time. Then, without your being able to say why, it begins suddenly to dance in the sun. It is like a woman whirling the folds of her dress. And the waves covered with foam are like a multitude of white petticoats."

We listened to her, and nobody would have dared to interrupt her when she recited like a litany the names of the fishing-boats and the fishermen of the little port in which she was born —

"*Notre-Dame de Souffrance,* belonging to Locmael."

"*La Volante,* belonging to young Turbé."

"*Le Forban,* belonging to old Guiscrif."

The evening on which she spoke of the fishing-nets drying at the end of the masts, and floating lighter and more delicate than a bride's veil, she firmly asserted, "There are some of them as blue as the robe of the Virgin Mary in May."

On the day after All Saints' Day I did not find my companions at the workshop. They were at the cemetery, and the *patron* asked me why I had not gone too.

It was raining, and I replied that I preferred to work rather than to be walking about in such dirty weather.

"It's not a walk, it's a visit to our dead," he shouted as if he were angry.

It amused me a little to see him so furious.

"Yes," I answered, laughing, "but I have no dead."

He looked at me as if I had just said something extraordinary, and then he went out to go himself to the cemetery.

Mme. Dalignac was already sewing in Sandrine's place. It was the first time that I had been alone with her. She looked at me in the same way as the *patron* had done, before saying to me, "You are lucky to have no dead."

"It is because I have no living either," I said.

She stopped sewing with a very marked air of astonishment. Then her lips moved as if to ask me a question, and finally she said rather quickly, "When you first came here, I thought you were as young as Duretour, but as time went on I knew that you had left twenty behind."

She stopped speaking, and it seemed to me that a sort of embarrassment prevented her from looking at me when she asked me a moment afterwards, "Do you live alone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She stopped again. My replies appeared to increase her embarrassment. However, she went on in a playful way, "You have a lover, of course?"

"No, ma'am."

She blushed as she continued, "I mean . . . a sweetheart, anyhow, some one who loves you."

I do not know why I thought of Sandrine and her

Jacques, and I replied plainly once again, "No, ma'am."

But at the same moment there came into my mind the picture of an old, affectionate face, and in turn I continued, "Yes, I have, though; Mlle. Herminie loves me."

And seeing Mme. Dalignac all attention, I hastened to explain.

"She's a very old neighbor I do little services for, and she rewards me by telling me stories."

Mme. Dalignac smiled with satisfaction.

"You have in her a good grandmother?"

The truth was so different that I replied immediately, "Oh, no, she's more like my little child."

There was a silence; then, as if it hurt Mme. Dalignac somewhat to hear it, she raised her head, and our eyes met. She lowered hers first, but it seemed to me that they had the same expression as Sandrine's, and that she too had just offered me something.

The *patron* returned somewhere about the middle of the morning. He brought Sandrine back with him; he had met her in a path of the cemetery. She was breathless, and her clothes retained a smell of damp earth.

"The graves are all drenched with water," she said with a tired air, as she sat down.

Mme. Dalignac scolded her softly.

"Seeing that you are ill," she said, "you shouldn't have gone out in such fearful weather."

"But I am not ill," Sandrine protested. "I've only got a cold." And her black eyes had a sort of anxiety in them when she repeated, "I am not ill, I assure you."

Mme. Dalignac smiled to reassure her.

"We know that quite well," she said, "but you might have gone to the cemetery some other day." She added, as if she attached no importance to it all, "Cemeteries don't fly away, and the dead have the time to wait."

"I'll return to work to-morrow," said Sandrine almost immediately.

She wanted to say something else, but her voice became hoarse before she had finished the first word, and she had a fit of coughing.

She coughed jerkily with a sort of impatience. She breathed strongly, and made violent efforts to tear from her chest something which appeared to have taken root there deeply. Her cough had still the same hollow and cracked sounds, but to-day it seemed to stir up a thick and moving thing which remained hooked to the bottom.

She was obliged to sit down; her face went quite white, and the sweat rolled down her forehead. She made another effort to cough. There was a dry snap in her throat, like the breaking of a stout wire. Then she struck her chest with her clenched fist, as she had done the first time, and she said, laughing, "I must really get rid of this cold."

She hitched up her cape, which was slipping from her shoulders, and she went away, coughing afresh.

Her departure left behind it a sense of uneasiness. The *patron* remained standing without speaking, and

Mme. Dalignac, who was holding her hands flat against her work, abruptly said, "There are some colds which kill."

The *patron* pulled his jacket round his chest, as if he had suddenly felt cold. Then he drew his stool up next to his wife, and the silence returned.

On the following day, Sandrine coughed much less. But she remained short of breath and very hoarse, and her cough always seemed to catch at something in her chest.

From time to time, the *patron* asked her gayly, "How goes it, Sandrine?"

"It's going on all right," replied Sandrine just as gayly and imitating the *patron's* accent.

The workshop was now calm. The threads of all colors covering the work-table could be seen and the basket of braids and hooks and eyes was very tidy. There were no more exclamations of impatience or tired nerves, when it became necessary to search for a piece of lace or a lining which had fallen under the table, and which one of us was treading on without seeing it.

The *patron* no longer blundered into the dummies when passing from one room to another, and Mme. Dalignac's face had that restful look which was so pleasant to see.

Everybody listened when Bergeounette sang or told a story. She had a very muffled voice, and her high notes reminded you of a cheap whistle; but her low notes were full and very soft to the ear.

She spoke with ease, and could not bear an ill-sound-

ing word. And when one of us wanted to know whether a word was French or not, she asserted authoritatively, "I know, I tell you, I have my certificates."

Bouledogue could not turn phrases like Bergeounette. She flung her words away from her as you throw a stone, and it always seemed as though she were going to demolish something. She sang but seldom, although her voice was finer than Bergeounette's.

Since we had been less busy, she grumbled less, and one day she said, "The work should always be managed like this."

Mme. Dalignac came up.

"I should like it just as much as you do," she said, "but if I had to turn my customers away, we should have nothing more to do now, and I should be obliged to turn you away too."

Bouledogue scowled, then she went on, "Since we do more work at the busy times, we ought to be paid more."

Mme. Dalignac shook her head in the way you do when you know that something is impossible, and Bergeounette laughed.

"You'd perhaps like to make a revolution," she said.

Bouledogue showed her teeth, and her voice rolled a little as she replied, "Work should never be a toil."

I knew that Mme. Dalignac was defenseless against the demands of her customers, and that it hurt her very much to have to ask her price for her costumes. But what Bouledogue had just said appeared to me to be so right that I was preparing to come to her support, when Bergeounette forestalled me.

"Here's another one going to preach now," she said.

It was not the first time that she had reproved me in this way, and I was therefore covered with confusion, and I merely looked at Mme. Dalignac.

The *patron* did not like arguments. He changed the subject by asking Bergeounette to sing one of her country songs. And Bergeounette, who was still laughing at us, sang a very old song, of which she often hummed the tune —

"Dans le bon vieux temps,
Me dit souvent ma grand'mère. . . .
Dans le bon vieux temps,
Un jupon durait cent ans." [1]

This made everybody laugh; but Mme. Dalignac's careworn look soon returned. She fixed her eyes on me in her turn, and said as if answering my reproach, "I have to work as hard as you, and my share of the money is often the smallest."

She stepped backwards the three paces which separated her from her cutting table, without ceasing to look at me, and Bergeounette began another verse of her song.

[1] "In the good old times, my grandmother often told me . . . in the good old times, a petticoat lasted a hundred years."

IV

The end of December brought with it the dead season, and we had to separate once more. Bouledogue left first, to take a situation in a manufactory of preserved foods. Up to the present, she had employed the time during which she was out of work in making fine underclothes with a friend, but the friend had just gone abroad, and Bouledogue did not know where to go to get the same kind of work.

She maintained her grandmother, with whom she lived. Her earnings were soon spent, and a day's work lost condemned the two women to privation.

After Sandrine she was the best needlewoman in the workshop. It was no use asking her for new ideas, or leaving her to arrange a trimming according to her taste, but when she had said, "I've finished stitching that dress," you could rely on her work, for she never forgot anything.

On the day of her departure, she turned towards the empty shelves, as if she owed them a grudge, and there was a heavy rumble in her voice while she said, "When grandmother left herself without enough to eat in order to let me learn a fine trade, she little suspected that I should nevertheless have to go to the factory."

Sandrine was the only one who remained. Mme.

Dalignac shared with her the small quantity of work brought by her customers.

I left in turn, and, on the following day, I was taken on by a furrier who was asking for workgirls for a job he had in hand.

The wages offered were much higher than those paid by Mme. Dalignac, and for that reason I gave my whole attention to this new work. My fingers soon learned to manipulate the squared needle, but I immediately experienced a great difficulty in breathing. Thousands and thousands of fine hairs escaped from the furs, and floated about in the air. An unbearable tickling took me in the throat, and I coughed without stopping.

The others advised me to drink a lot of water. But the cough began again a minute afterwards. At the end of a few hours I began to bleed violently at the nose. And the same evening the *patron* showed me the door.

"Off you go," he said. "You're no good here."

The fear of being out of work for a long time made me seek a new job. I found it in a firm of menders, where I gave my whole mind to my work. But here again I came up against a serious disadvantage. In front of the shop, which was already ill-lit, men of all ages stopped each minute to look at the menders seated in a row. Some of them came so near and remained so long, blocking out the daylight, that at last I could no longer see the pattern of the threads, and I botched my darns. And in spite of my desire to do my best, I had to leave to get away from the *patronne's* complaints.

Tired of looking for employment in which I might use my skill, I decided to go into a firm which my old neighbor, Mlle. Herminie, had just left. The work consisted of sewing strips of leather and flannel on to cylinders intended for printing machines. It was hard work which had to be done standing, and which had made Mlle. Herminie hunchbacked in less than three months. I left it at the end of the first week, for I felt that I should become hunchbacked too.

Sandrine, whom I often met in the street, pressed me to come and spend my time in the workshop instead of remaining alone in my room.

I found Bergeounette there; she had never stopped coming. Her husband would neither feed her nor tolerate her at home doing nothing; and, during every period of unemployment, there were endless battles between them.

She was strong and hardy, and she fought her husband without fear. But now and then she received an unlucky blow which left her fearful and trembling. Therefore, to avoid disputes, she pretended to work for a part of the day. She carried her work about with her, but she did not go far with it. Her principal occupation was to look out of the window, and she always went downstairs when the one-armed man passed.

I was so comfortable in the workshop that I forgot the worries of the dead season. Like Bergeounette, I brought my underclothes with me to repair. They had neither lace nor ornament, and she poked fun at

them, saying, "That stuff's not worth the trouble of mending. You darn it in one place, and it tears in another."

Like her, too, I often went up to the window, and she was astonished to see me looking over the roofs instead of watching the people passing by in the avenue. She pointed to the sky, and said maliciously, "He won't come from up there."

Sometimes I brought with me a book wrapped up in the same paper as the bread for my lunch. The *patron* turned over the leaves, and gave it back to me quickly, and in a scolding tone he said, "You have a passion for reading, eh?"

This reproof had been flung at me so often that I had acquired the habit of excusing myself by replying that I only read in odd moments, or during the night, when I could not sleep.

In spite of the lack of work, Bergeounette retained her full face, and her lunch was as copious as in the past.

On the other hand, I felt very run down. My cheeks were hollowed about the jaws, and my neck no longer filled the collar of my blouse. The *patron* teased me about it.

"Your nose is growing longer," he said.

Sandrine laughed with me, and Bergeounette asserted that reading was not so filling as dry bread.

Bergeounette was not very fond of me. It annoyed her to see me remain half the morning without speak-

ing and without moving my feet, and she accused me of only liking silence.

Yet when she sang, or told a story, I always listened to her with great pleasure, and many times I had asked for the end of a tale which the *patron* had interrupted.

She was not very fond of my face either. She said that she could not tell how it was made. She looked at her own in a little mirror, and when she had made certain that it was still brown and solid-looking, she expressed astonishment that mine should be sometimes pale and washed out, as if I were ill, and sometimes startling in its freshness, as if I possessed the finest health in the world. And although there were never any squabbles between us, we appeared to be separated by an obstacle which neither of us could ever surmount.

It was not long before little Duretour too came and spent a few hours with us. But she brought no sewing with her. Her gayety was sufficient to occupy her. She amused herself hopping from one foot to the other, and she never finished telling us of the lovely outings she had on Sundays with her sweetheart. She aped actresses and ballet-dancers. Or else she imitated the studied gestures of a restaurant waiter about to carve some costly bird. And while she pretended to carve the thread-basket holding her elbows in the air and her fingers like pigeons' wings, she seemed herself to be some delicate and very precious bird.

There were long discussions between her and Bergeounette on the subject of food. Bergeounette talked of calves' sweetbread, which she liked very much. But

Duretour did not like calves' sweetbread. She said with a little grimace of disgust, "It's good enough for old men who haven't any teeth."

And she laughed, disclosing her own, which were brighter than fine porcelain.

She talked of theaters and restaurants, with such details that the *patron* said, "She will end up by falling to riches."

Yet she had no desire for luxury. She even confessed that she often felt intimidated among people outside.

Her sweetheart was no bolder. One day, when they had tried to play at being rich, they had gone to the Champs-Elysées in a cab, and both had got down to look at the dainties in a confectioner's shop. But they remained so long in front of the shop that the cabman went to sleep on his seat. Neither of them had dared to disturb him, and they had walked up and down the pavement awaiting his awakening.

When Duretour had nothing new to tell us, she glued her forehead against the window-pane. But she paid no attention to the passersby or to the stretch of sky above the roofs. The only thing that interested her were the funerals which passed the whole day along the Avenue du Maine.

The moment she saw the hearse of the poor, which, light and flimsy, came along quickly, jumping in an awkward way on the granite setts, she said, "Ha, here comes a grasshopper!"

But when a hearse, heavy with plumes and flowers, came slowly up the avenue, she swelled out her cheeks,

to say with exaggerated respect, "That now is an important death."

She also tried to make signs to the masons opposite, but they no longer wasted any time looking at the workshop. The rain drenched them unceasingly and their red and blue belts disappeared beneath the lime-sacks which they put round their shoulders.

It was their turn to be busy. The trowels dipped without stopping into the hods full of mortar; and the stones mounted up and the height of the walls rapidly increased.

The tumbrils still spilt their sand and stone on to the pavement, but the stones now rolled into the mud with a dull sound, and the winter wind prevented us from hearing the fresh and silky slipping of the sand.

V

In January, Sandrine had a serious relapse. For the first two days, she took no notice of my attentions, but, as soon as her fever had abated, she begged me to go and get her some work.

The *patron* shouted, taking his head into both his hands, "It's terrible. . . . Where will she get the strength to work?"

And bent up he took a turn round the room, as if he were looking for help beneath the table or behind the stools.

Mme. Dalignac made one big gesture of impotence, and prepared the parcel of work, which I carried away immediately.

I found Sandrine sitting up in bed, and stitching at a little boy's breeches. Her black hair hid one-half of her cheeks, ringlets strayed beneath her chin. She was breathing with difficulty; from her chest came a gurgling noise, and her lips were dry and cracked.

She undid the parcel quickly, and the breeches, which she flung to the foot of the bed, remained puffed out at the bottom.

I returned each day to Sandrine. I sometimes arrived very early, but I always found her sitting with her work scattered over the bedclothes. Her cape, which

she kept over her shoulders, covered her figure and was spread around her. And her whole body, which was lying crossways, was stretched towards the window.

She exhibited no ill-temper on account of the dull weather. She merely said, "If ever I become rich, I will have a house built which will be all windows."

There were days when the rain flowed so heavily over the sloping window-pane that it made a sort of curtain which prevented the daylight from entering. At other times, the wind shook the framework as if it was trying to tear it away and carry it afar. And when the wind and the rain came together, a damp cold entered the room, and penetrated right into Sandrine's bed.

She drew her clothes more closely around her, and brought up her feet beneath her, but fatigue compelled her to stretch her limbs. Then she would say with a little regret, "When I am rested, the warmth goes away."

I suffered with the cold too, and I should have liked to have lit a fire, but there was neither stove nor fireplace in the room. The room was so little that the bed took up the whole length of one side. The other side was filled by a table and two chairs, and it would have been difficult to sit down in the passage in the middle.

There were rows of shelves nearly everywhere, but the most noticeable thing in the room was the number of photographs of children. A little boy and a little girl, sometimes alone, sometimes holding hands. And above the table, at the spot where the fireplace might

have been, a frame larger than the others showed the children and their parents together. Jacques held the two little ones on his knees, and Sandrine, standing behind them, was leaning over to put her arms round them.

The girl, like her mother, had curly hair and a well-cut face, while the boy, like his father, had straight hair and a face whose outline seemed rubbbed out.

Bergeounette used to come to see me at Sandrine's. She brought an extraordinary animation into the little room, which she filled with disorder and noise. It was as if she had sat on all the furniture at the same time, and after her departure, I was always obliged to sweep up. This made Sandrine laugh; she said that Bergeounette was like a good dog badly brought up.

Then Jacques would arrive for a few moments. He became confused when he saw me, and he remained standing like a stranger. Sandrine forced him to sit on the bottom of the bed, and each moment she looked up at him as if she feared that he might have disappeared suddenly.

The orders returned with the first days of March, and Mme. Dalignac recalled Bouledogue and Duretour.

Bergeounette, who had not worried about anything during the slackness, made an exaggerated show of pleasure at being occupied once more. Her low laugh, which seemed broken, was heard every moment, and we got no reply from her when we asked her the reason.

When Bergeounette was standing, her whole body

moved with ease, but when she remained quiet on her stool, she made you think of something difficult to manipulate. Her square shoulders seemed as hard as granite, and when passing by her you were careful of her elbows. But, whether she was moving about or at rest, her fine, smooth hair remained tight against her head, while her face seemed to veer with all the winds.

One afternoon, when returning to work, I saw her go down the avenue at an extraordinary gallop. She advanced by enormous bounds, and knocked into everybody, trying to escape from her husband, who was following closely after. And suddenly she disappeared within the entrance, and pushed the door to behind her.

The man tried to push in the door; then he gave it a heavy kick, and after having looked upwards, as if he hoped to see his wife at a window, he turned round and made off.

I found Bergeounette upstairs. She was trembling and in a sweat, and between her gasps for breath, she said with an air full of fear, "If he had caught me, he would have killed me."

When she was calmer, the *patron* asked her in his sing-song accent, "Were you as white as a little lamb and were you saying pretty things to him when he became angry?"

She started to laugh, and throwing her arms about in a disjointed way, she confessed that since the beginning of the slack season she had stolen each week a gold coin from her husband's hiding-place, and that a little while

ago, during a terrible quarrel, she had boasted about it out of bravado.

"How will you be able to go home this evening?" asked Mme. Dalignac.

Bergeounette reassured her with a movement of the hand.

"I'll go home late," she said. She laughed again very low, and as if speaking to herself she added, "He's never very bad when he's in bed."

On the following day, she returned, looking as usual, and nobody spoke to her of what had happened the day before.

Since her return to needlework, Bouledogue had never stopped growling about her fingers, which had lost their suppleness and fineness of touch.

"How can you expect me to hold a needle with stiff, hard fingers like that?" she asked.

And she showed us her hands, which were covered with callosities and broken blisters. Her specialty was the little folds and gathers in light tissues, and her skill was so great that none of us could fill her place.

When, after long hours of work, a blouse of silk muslin left her hands frilled and finished, you would have said that it had been made by magic, so unruffled and fresh it was.

The *patron* scarcely dared to touch it. He lifted it up to the light with great precaution, and said very pleased, "I do believe that it grew all by itself in the sun."

Therefore, when Bouledogue now saw the fabrics stick to her fingers and fray out, she burst into violent anger, which always ended by making her weep.

Mme. Dalignac tried to get her to take patience. But Bouledogue was incapable of patience. She swore like a man and cursed the whole world. Moreover, she could not say enough about the women in the factory who had mocked at her delicate hands when they touched the tins that flayed her palms and broke her nails.

Listening to her, we conceived a great fear of the approaching slack season, and each of us expressed aloud her hope of avoiding the factory.

Bergeounette alone laughed at it all, as she laughed at everything else. She even succeeded in soothing Bouledogue, by cleverly directing her attention to the evening dances given here and there in the Plaisance quarter by small societies of workers. Bouledogue loved dancing more than anything. Her voice changed completely as she inquired the exact date and place where the ball was to be held.

Her love of dancing forced her to tell all sorts of lies to her grandmother, to whom she dared not confess it. Happily, she had a cousin of her own age who shared her taste. By a mutual prearrangement they were able to deceive the grandmother, and to set themselves free.

During the summer, they went as far as Robinson, but it was a long way, and the train which was to bring them back left them only one hour's respite. Therefore they did not lose a minute. They ran like a flash

from the station to the ball-room. And there, without worrying about the youngsters who were looking for partners, they clasped each other and danced with the ever-present anxiety of perhaps missing the train back.

In the winter they went to the Bal Bullier, but, although they no longer had the trouble of the journey, they feared to be recognized and accused. Bouledogue's fear of this was so intense that sometimes she crossed her two hands over her head and said, "If Grandmother were to find out one of these days that I go to that ball, she would die of shame."

That did not prevent her, on the following Sunday, from pretending that she was going for a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens, which she never entered. It happened that the grandmother also wanted to go for a walk in the gardens, but, as she soon grew tired, the girls seated her on a chair, and went off rapidly behind her back.

On such a day, there was no question of staying long at the ball. The cousin would have remained quite readily, but Bouledogue pitilessly brought her back to her grandmother. And in the same tone in which she used to say to us, "One day's work's enough," she said to her cousin, "One dance is enough to satisfy the desire."

Sandrine had come back to her place at the same time as we. Her chest now gave out only a slight rumbling, and when the *patron* shouted out to her from the end of the workshop, "How goes it, Sandrine?" she

replied immediately, "Oh! I'm going on all right."

She looked at us and smiled, and her black eyes were as soft as new velvet. But her hair was no longer as brilliant and her curls seemed less elastic; yet she never complained.

Once only did she speak thus of the fatigue of her nights. "It's very funny. . . . Since I've had this cold, I can't lie down in bed any longer, and I have to be half sitting in order to be able to sleep a little."

One morning, I caught her on the staircase when she thought she was alone. She was climbing the stairs slowly, and keeping her bust rigid and her mouth shut. But the air which she expelled from her nose made a loud noise, like a slap.

Mme. Dalignac sent her to her doctor, who advised a long rest and good food. Sandrine laughed with all her heart when she reported the doctor's words.

"Rest," she said. "Where the deuce does he think I'm going to get that? I don't know any shop where they sell it."

Mme. Doublé, who was there, flung at her a glance full of ill-will. She spoke at length of colds which turned into contagious diseases, and said that she would not have a tuberculous girl in her workshop.

I looked up at Sandrine. She retained her calm and rather childish air, and, when Mme. Doublé had gone, she said, laughing, "Her girls would do well not to catch colds."

The month of April brought back the urgent work.

Bouledogue's hands had recovered their old suppleness, and her long well-turned fingers skillfully manipulated the finest tissues. But her nervous irritability returned with the untidiness of the work-table, and her voice growled hoarsely when we were searching for something that had gone astray.

Bergeounette remained indifferent to the annoyances of the work. She continued to watch for the passing of the one-armed man. And the moment one of us showed too much impatience, she sang her old song, which had a verse for all occasions:

"Dans le bon vieux temps,
Les pâtés et les brioches,
Dans le bon vieux temps,
Croissaient au milieu des champs."[1]

As we approached the Easter holidays, the day's work became as hard as before All Saints' Day. The *patron's* machine never stopped, and the rumbling of mine hardly made less noise. And each time that Duretour set out with a finished dress the *patron* said, clapping his hands, "Courage, ladies! Easter will bring us two days' holiday to rest in."

The day before Easter, as he was repeating this, Bergeounette replied, "Sandrine will have time enough to run after her breath on those two days."

Everybody looked at Sandrine. She had her mouth open, and there was a sort of mist about her face.

[1] "In the good old times, pies and cakes, in the good old times, grew in the fields."

In the evening, after the day's work had been done, she allowed herself the time to smile.

"It's true," she said, "that I am running after my breath to-day."

Her voice was trembling and indistinct, and you would have said that her eyes were letting all their light slip away from them.

And for the first time for many days she went up the avenue with me without her parcel of work for the night.

VI

On the following Tuesday, we were all late in beginning the new week. Duretour herself had lost her spirits, and Bouledogue took an endless time to unfold her apron. The *patron* made a pretense of scolding us.

"Easter should be a three days' holiday for some of you," he said.

I perceived immediately that Sandrine had not yet arrived, and I was about to remark on it to Mme. Dalignac, but just at that moment she said, opening a letter on which the address was all askew—

"This is certainly from a customer who is annoyed."

Every one remained standing, expecting the vexation of a dress to be altered. But, instead of explaining to us what it was all about, as she usually did on these occasions, Mme. Dalignac held the paper away from her and then brought it up close again. Then her eyes became blurred before the two lines which were at the top of the page, and finally she read aloud:

"My Sandrine is dead.

"Jacques."

In the silence which followed, our heads turned towards Sandrine's place, and nobody seemed to understand the sense of the letter.

Like the others I looked at the empty place, but at the same time I saw once more the sad eyes and the tired smile of Sandrine on the Saturday before, and I understood that, on that evening, she was at the end of her life.

Mme. Dalignac must have remembered too; for her eyes, which had widened, suddenly narrowed, and her hands began to tremble.

A tumult of voices arose, saying the same words. It was like a jostling of questions to which no reply was given. And suddenly Bouledogue gave vent to a dull growl; then she seized Sandrine's stool, and struck it on the floor with so much violence that the feet were split apart and it fell to pieces.

Nobody knew who it was that the anger on all our faces was directed against. Bergeounette seemed ready to throw herself at some one, and little Duretour repeated, as a kind of reproach to Sandrine, "But seeing that she'd got her Jacques back again —"

Mme. Dalignac soon stopped trembling. Her face, ordinarily so gentle, showed revolt, as at the announcement of an unbearable injustice. And while the *patron* took up the letter to read it in his turn, she rapidly put on her hat, and beckoned to me to accompany her.

Everything was tidy in Sandrine's room. You smelt an odor of washed floors, and the little white bed seemed to light the room as much as the April sun.

Jacques was half prostrate on the floor. He got up painfully while Mme. Dalignac asked him quickly, "How did it happen? Where is Sandrine?"

"She is there," he replied, turning towards the bed.

You could see no swelling of the covers, not even at the place where the feet should be; but Mme. Dalignac had dropped to her knees, and was passing her hand along the whole length of the bed, as if to make sure that Sandrine was really there. Then she uncovered her face, and gave her a long look.

"She died yesterday," Jacques said.

His mouth trembled, and his eyelids closed. He tried to fortify his voice to add, "When I arrived she had already vomited all her blood."

A neighbor entered noiselessly. She was sewing at a child's apron.

"She did not take long in dying," she said. And in the same low, calm voice, she explained: "I heard her coughing all night through the wall. In the morning, I heard her walking up and down, and suddenly she cried 'Jacques, Jacques.' Her voice sounded like some one calling for help. I rushed in and I found her vomiting on the floor. She was vomiting red, and it would not stop. Then I became frightened and I wanted to call for help too. Sandrine prevented me, and begged me to go for M. Jacques."

And as the neighbor had finished sewing her piece, she pricked the needle into her blouse, and went off on tiptoe.

Jacques took up again his position on the floor, and his bowed head now touched Sandrine's.

On my return to the workshop, my great desire to find Sandrine there once more made me look at her

place. But only a stool lying on its side and showing its broken bars was there. Mme. Dalignac tried to tell the others what she knew; but her throat was stopped up, and I was obliged to speak for her.

I felt strangled too, and it was not easy for me to tell everything at once. And when the girls knew the details which the neighbor had given, Bouledogue said harshly to the *patron,* "Easter was no holiday for her."

The *patron* did not appear to have heard. He was clutching his machine with both his hands, and a thin stream of saliva ran down from his mouth.

On a sign from Mme. Dalignac, I picked up the broken stool to carry it into the kitchen, and when I returned, little Duretour was saying in a loud voice, "The love of Sandrine is also dead."

And then there was nothing more to be heard except the repeated cry of a flower-girl who was going down the avenue and the ticking of the clock, which seemed to beat more quickly and loudly.

In the evening, I returned to Sandrine's room with Mme. Dalignac. Jacques was still half prostrate on the floor. He had merely brought up his knees, which he held with his clasped fingers.

The neighbor said to us very low, "He has been sleeping like that since the morning."

Jacques heard her. He got up and replied, "I wasn't sleeping, I was with Sandrine."

He was quite dazed, and with the movement he made to hold himself up against the wall, he displaced a

photograph of the children, which remained hanging askew.

The following day, at the hour for the funeral, a man entered Sandrine's room holding before him a long box made of rough planks. He looked round for a place in the room, and I had to go out with Mme. Dalignac, to leave free the narrow space in the middle. But in spite of that, when the man set down the coffin between the bed and the table, he struck against the feet of Jacques, who, however, had retreated to the window.

Another man set down the coffin-lid which he held in his arms, and they both raised the dead woman to place her in the long box. Sandrine was wrapped up in a torn sheet, and her hands, which were crossed on her breast, passed through a hole.

And while one of the men was trying to keep her head upright, the handkerchief which held her curls slipped away, and made a sort of bandage over her forehead.

Jacques looked on without a word; but when he saw the lid being placed in position, he seemed to lose his head. He pushed the men away, and knelt down by Sandrine's side. He raised the bandage, which made her look like a saint draped in white, and he implored, "Have pity on me, Sandrine. Don't go away."

The anguish of his heart was so real that the men did not dare to lead him away. The neighbor and Mme. Dalignac finally took him away while he was still saying beseechingly, "Have pity on me, my Sandrine."

The little photograph still stood askew, and the children looked as though they were leaning forward to see what was being done to their mother.

I went up to it to put it straight, but one of the men asked me, "Are those two lovely little children hers?"

I nodded Yes.

Then he took the frame and slipped it into Sandrine's hands which the torn sheet let through. Then he looked at the narrow passage outside the door, and said, "We shall have to take her out upright."

He went on in a pitiful voice. "It is not because she is heavy, but these wretched boxes are not solid, and in carting them from one story to another, we're always afraid of accidents."

And as the time had come to carry down the dead woman, the man drew a strong rope from his pocket, and firmly encircled the middle of the wretched box with it.

The hearse was waiting below. It was a carriage without any ornament, and I recognized it as one of those which Duretour called grasshoppers. The *patron* himself hooked on the white crown which he had just brought with him. Bergeounette placed along the coffin the little bouquets of violets which each of us offered to Sandrine, and immediately the grasshopper started.

It went along the Boulevard Raspail so quickly that we had much difficulty in following it, and Jacques, who was walking first behind it, rested his hand on it, as if he were trying to prevent it from bumping so much.

As we passed, women got up from the benches on

which they were seated. Some of them made the sign of the cross, and kept their hands clasped. Two children stopped stirring up the sand with their wooden spades, and tapped noisily on their little pails, singing out to the tune of a church bell, "A funeral, a funeral."

The day was very sunny. Every sound went up into the mild air clearly and precisely, and all along the way were chestnut trees in bloom.

Entering the cemetery, the grasshopper went still more quickly. Its wheels made a harsh noise on the thick gravel, and the crown hooked on behind swung this way and that. The cemetery was also all in bloom, and the tombs seemed whiter in the sun.

Bergeounette, who read out the names on the signposts, named the crosspaths that we passed, "Path of the Dead . . . Cypress Path . . . Path of the Tombs."

And each time the words left her mouth as though she were rejecting them with loathing. But when the hearse turned in between two rows of trees which stood up straight and slender like smooth columns, she said aloud with an air of triumph, "White Maple Path."

The grasshopper stopped near a long trench, where coffins were lying side by side in a row, and our group closed up to say Good-by to Sandrine.

Bouledogue wore the face of her bad-tempered days. Her lips curled up in the middle only, and showed but two of her teeth. And as I bent astonished over the big trench she said to me, "That's the common grave."

Her voice echoed with such wide and deep vibrations that it seemed to come out of the earth to go and strike

against the vaults all around and the beflowered graves.

The undertaker's men hurried on with their work, for another funeral was coming towards the common grave. They took hold of Sandrine briskly, and deposited her near the coffins of two little children which had been placed end to end so as not to waste room. And immediately the grasshopper made off along the path, in which it was preceded by two of its kind.

Jacques was not weeping. He followed the *patron* and his wife with docility. But, before leaving the cemetery, he turned towards the white maples, and his lips moved as if he were speaking to them.

I, too, turned towards the white maples. I wanted to see once more their frail foliage, more delicate than lace, which seemed to be about to fly away in the wind. Then I lowered my eyes to look around on the immense square of tombs which shone in the sun, and when I went back to Bergeounette she said, breathing deeply, "The cemetery is as lovely as a paradise to-day."

VII

THE Easter holidays and the funeral had made us very backward with the work. The *patron* decided to take on a new girl to replace Sandrine, and he wrote out a notice which Bergeounette went and pasted up in the Rue de la Gaîté. He took the same care with his notices as with his embroidery. He wrote them in a round, legible hand, and you could easily read from afar —

"WANTED
A very good sempstress.
Very Urgent."

Bouledogue growled, "Good needlewomen are not running about the streets at the present moment."

One came who could not do much, but the *patron* kept her for lack of better. She was called Roberte. She was neither ugly nor ill-made; but her conceited air made her very unpleasant to look at.

An under-current of mockery seemed to enter the workshop at the same time as she did. Little Duretour made grimaces at her behind her back. Bouledogue showed her her teeth, and Bergeounette said quietly, "She is stupid enough to make a donkey weep."

The noise of the machine often prevented me from hearing what the others said, but when Roberte spoke,

the expression on her face always made me want to laugh.

She struck an attitude for the slightest word or gesture, and she sat down or got up with such affectation that the *patron* sometimes asked, quite bewildered, "Whatever is the matter with her?"

At the end of the first week, when she had gone out for a moment, Mme. Dalignac said in her turn, "Every time I look in her direction, it gives me an unpleasant surprise to find her wretched features instead of Sandrine's lovely face."

"Suppose you put her in my place," said little Duretour. And she wriggled, pursing up her pretty mouth to resemble Roberte.

When the laughter had died down, everybody agreed with her, and Roberte had to go to the end of the table, while Duretour suddenly became very grave as she went to sit in Sandrine's place.

Our customers were now demanding their dresses for the races. And as Mme. Dalignac was beginning once more to work late, I got into the habit of coming in to work with her every evening.

It happened once that a dress to be finished kept us until daylight, and the others found us in the morning with haggard faces and tired limbs.

Bouledogue, who was always the first to arrive, threw us a furious look. She swept the bits of materials from the table, repeating what she had already said so many times, "If nobody would work late, customers would be obliged to get along with what they'd got."

At bottom I agreed with her; but I did not see how we could do otherwise, and I was annoyed with her for adding her scolding to our fatigue.

Mme. Dalignac did not reply either. I saw her eyelids blink a moment; and the minute afterwards she was distributing the work, giving instructions in her gentle, steady voice.

On days like this, Bouledogue growled without stopping. When she had finished about one thing she began on another. The new house opposite gave her a thousand opportunities for her anger. She could not endure its high windows and its broad stone balconies. And her voice seemed to fill the whole workshop when she said, "It's the houses of the poor that ought to have balconies. The old people and the children would be able to sit in the sun and fresh air."

Her discontent grew when she thought of her grandmother, who was too feeble to go downstairs, and was obliged to take the air at the window of their room, which opened on a narrow yard full of bad odors. And each time that a noise from the fine house attracted her attention she shouted passionately: "You see, nobody will ever come out on to those lovely balconies."

Since Sandrine had died, the *patron* had been unable either to give an order or to reprimand. He remained for hours as if he were brooding on a fixed idea. And one day, although nobody had said anything about Sandrine, he exclaimed in the middle of a silence, "The doctor hadn't foreseen the hemorrhage."

"Nor did we," replied his wife, with an air of regret.

And as the *patron* sank once more into his depression, Mme. Dalignac begged Bergeounette to sing to restore a little gayety. But Bergeounette herself regretted Sandrine so much that no song came to her memory.

She tried two or three times to begin one, but there was always some one who said to her, "Oh no, not that one, it's too sad."

And silence fell on the room again.

Yet, when Roberte started to sing, there were moments of noisy gayety. Her voice would not have been unpleasant if she had sung in a simple way, but she made it ugly by trying to be affected. Moreover, she deformed her words without troubling about their real sense, and in this way she coupled together such incongruous phrases that we could not help bursting out into laughter.

On the day when she sang a song which everybody knew —

> "Selon moi, vois-tu, c'est l'indifférence
> Qui blesse le cœur et le fait souffrir;"[1]

she came out in all serenity with —

> "Seule dans ma voiture, c'est la différence
> Qui blesse le cœur et le fait s'ouvrir."[2]

This sent Duretour into such crazy laughter that

[1] "In my opinion, you see, it is indifference that wounds the heart and makes it suffer."

[2] "Alone in my carriage, it is the difference that wounds the heart and makes it open."

she slipped from her stool under the table. And while Bergeounette was choking against the window, Bouledogue leaning backwards laughed until she cried.

The *patron* stopped Roberte, who was going on with her song.

"I say," he said. "Eh . . . You can sing when we are less busy."

Shortly afterwards, Bergeounette began to sing a song full of melancholy, each verse of which finished thus —

"Que les beaux jours sont courts.
Que les beaux jours sont courts." [1]

She allowed her voice to drag, as if she wished to lengthen the fine days indefinitely, and all the while her hands seemed busier with her work.

The *patron,* who had been complaining of fatigue, fainted one day at his machine. Yet he went on with his work, for he wanted to finish Mme. Moulin's mantle.

Mme. Moulin was a very good customer, but she always changed her mind when her clothes were half-made. At the first fitting she manifested a childish joy. Everything pleased her, but on the next day she would ask to see the dress. She turned it over and over, saying in a sad voice, "I think it is very good. It will be very pretty."

Then still in the same sad voice she spoke of her friends who had dresses like this and like that, and who advised her to have hers made similarly.

[1] "How short the fine days are."

She sighed in such an unhappy way, that Mme. Dalignac took pity on her, and said to us after her departure, "Put her dress on one side. She doesn't like it."

And when Mme. Moulin returned she laughed heartily on learning that the alterations she wanted could be made.

Three times already we had altered the trimming of her mantle. The evening before, she had gone through all the *patron's* drawings, and from them she had at length combined a new trimming. The *patron* had made a wry face at the jumble she demanded.

"I don't think that's very fetching," he said.

But Mme. Moulin, who was convinced of the contrary, had gone away joyously.

Therefore, in spite of his extreme fatigue, the *patron* hurried, fearing each minute to see her come back with another idea.

From time to time he stopped for a moment.

"I can't do any more," he said. He tried to make himself angry. "Devil take the women and their embroideries!"

He even worked late for a good hour, but when he went to leave his machine he fell back on to his stool, breathing with such difficulty that he made me think of Sandrine.

Alone with Mme. Dalignac, I asked her why she did not call the doctor in.

"Do you think he is ill?" she asked, looking up quickly.

"Oh, no!" And seeing that she did not look away again I went on placidly. "The doctors have medicines which give you back your strength."

She brightened up quickly.

"It's only tiredness," she said.

She informed me then that her husband had been very ill during the first year of their marriage. Several doctors had even declared that his lungs were so seriously affected that he could not live more than a year.

"Yet," she went on, "ten years have come and gone since then."

And as if that took away from her all care for the future she laughed a little.

Mme. Moulin arrived just at the moment when the *patron* had finished her mantle.. And before Duretour had shut the door behind her, she was heard saying, "It isn't embroidered yet, is it?"

Her entry into the workshop was as swift as a rush of wind. The *patron* showed her the garment with a touch of mischief. She clapped her hands together with a heartbroken air.

"Oh! how unfortunate!" she said. "And I'd just thought of another trimming." She pulled at a piece of the braiding, and her timid voice took courage to ask, "Can't it be unmade?"

"Oh, no, madam!"

And the *patron's* yellow face became quite red. This time, Mme. Moulin went away disconsolate.

The *patron* was now suffering with his stomach.

Every day he vomited up his meals, and Bergeounette, who made fun of everything, said:

"He's upset his soup-tureen again."

I was astonished that the doctor did not come, and I spoke about it again to Mme. Dalignac.

"I'm thinking of it," she said to me, "but if I bring him in, my husband will believe that he's very ill." She went on in a voice full of eagerness, "If we only had the luck not to have to make any more embroidered garments."

That luck was not ours; on the contrary, our customers asked expressly for embroidery, a lot of embroidery. Every costume had to be embroidered and re-embroidered, whether it was of wool, cloth, or silk. You would have thought that embroidery was the one thing worthy to deck and adorn women, and that it would not have been possible to live without it.

"They're all mad," said the *patron*.

He fainted once again at his machine, and while Bergeounette held him up to prevent him from rolling on to the floor, I went off running to find a doctor.

When he arrived, the *patron* was slowly swallowing some warm brew. He felt much better, and he pointed to me, laughing, and said, "It's only that young woman getting frightened."

The doctor laughed with him, as he inquired about his case.

The doctor's name was M. Bon. It was he who had seen Sandrine. He asked to see her again, and when he learned that she was dead he said, annoyed, "She

could have got well with rest and care. Her lungs were hardly touched."

"She had two children to keep," replied Mme. Dalignac, as if she wanted to excuse Sandrine for being dead.

M. Bon's eyes rested on each one of us, and then he said to the *patron,* "Now that I'm here, I might as well see whether your lungs are still behaving themselves."

And while we kept silent, he flicked the *patron's* back with his fingers, and then stopped to listen. He had his mouth open, but when he placed his ear against the left side, he caught his lip sharply with his teeth. And without moving his head in the slightest, he raised his eyes and looked fixedly at Mme. Dalignac.

He sat down once more opposite the *patron* and took hold of his wrist. After a short interval, he got up and said in a firm voice, "There . . . I find that you are very weak . . . and if you don't take rest at once . . . I can't say what will happen."

The *patron* scoffed at the idea.

"Té!" he said. "I shall perhaps do what Sandrine did?"

M. Bon turned away his head, and replied gravely, "Perhaps."

He wrote out a prescription, and while giving explanations and advice to Mme. Dalignac he dragged her out on to the staircase.

When she returned, the *patron* was grumbling, "If it weren't for their infernal embroideries, I might take a little rest."

"We have only to put an embroiderer in your place," said Mme. Dalignac.

The *patron* started up and shouted, "An embroiderer! But you won't be able to find one at the present moment."

"Very well, then! I'll refuse the dresses."

She spoke as if through her clenched teeth, and nobody knew her voice. And while Bergeounette and Bouledogue cried out in astonishment, the *patron* burst out laughing at the idea that his wife would refuse the dresses.

All the same, he wrote out a notice, which Bergeounette went and pasted up near the Montparnasse Station —

"WANTED

A male machine-embroiderer for careful work.

Very Urgent."

In the evening Mme. Dalignac spoke to me in a low voice. "The left lung isn't altogether right," she said: "Baptiste must go into the country, but the most urgent thing is that he should stop all work."

She strained at her shoulders, as she did when she feared trouble. Her eyes were a little wild and her face seemed withered. She pushed back her hair with her hands, as if it were too heavy on her temples, and, shaking her head, she said with great energy, "Now . . . let us work."

And until midnight, you could hear in the workshop

nothing but the rumbling of the sewing-machine, and the light click of needles against silk.

The following day, on her return from a visit to a customer, Mme. Dalignac was frightened to find her husband at his embroidering.

"Get out of that, Baptiste," she cried. "Get out of that."

And as he took no notice of her, she put her hand on the fly-wheel of the machine. The *patron* resisted.

"Oh, come," he said. "Let me finish. I've only a few more minutes' work to do."

"No! No! Get out of it!" And with her other hand she cast off the driving-band.

The *patron* fumed as he pushed back his stool.

"I shan't die for finishing this sleeve," he said.

"Have you already forgotten what M. Bon said?" his wife went on.

"No," said the *patron* sulkily. "I know that the same thing will happen to me as happened to Sandrine."

Mme. Dalignac looked over Bouledogue's head to seek my eyes. In the evening, she said in a lower voice than before, "Provided we can get hold of an embroiderer?" And the sigh that followed was long and tremulous.

An embroiderer came. He was a handsome, solid-looking man. He first of all fixed his daily wage, then he went up to the machine, and said insolently, "But it's an old model. How do you expect me to do careful work with that?"

"*I* can do it," said the *patron,* annoyed.

The handsome man looked him up and down.

"I only work with modern machines," he said.

He winked at us, and went off twirling his mustache.

Another came who wanted work very badly. He found the machine heavy, and, to make it lighter, he poured a quantity of oil into all the holes.

The *patron* began to fret. "You will spot the embroideries," he said.

"Everybody makes spots on them," the workman replied. And he demanded benzine.

At the end of the day, he had made so many spots and used so much benzine that the material had lost all its freshness.

The *patron* sent him away, with a howl of rage.

"It makes me more ill to see that than to work," he said to us.

Mme. Dalignac had an idea: "Suppose we take a woman?"

And Bergeounette went and pasted up another notice. Bouledogue growled again, "Embroideresses who know their job are not out of work at the present moment."

The one who came, carefully wiped the machine, tested its working for a moment, timidly fixed her day's wages, and worked to perfection until evening.

The *patron* made happy little signals to us, and when the embroideress had gone, he opened all his fingers fanwise and said, "She's a jolly good workwoman."

It was Saturday. While Mme. Dalignac was paying

wages, every one had a word to say about the newcomer.

Bergeounette thought her strong and healthy. Bouledogue had noticed that her clothes were very clean, and Duretour envied her height and complexion.

Mme. Dalignac herself appeared to be so pleased that I did not dare to distress her by saying that the embroideress had the shifty eye of the alcoholic.

The first three days all went well, but on the fourth the embroideress brought in a liter of wine wrapped up in paper. In the afternoon, she brought in another, which she drank in next to no time. And when the *patron* made a remark to her on the subject, she replied, "When you work hard, you get thirsty."

It was not long before the two liters were not sufficient, and at the mid-morning lunchtime she went out to the wine-seller's.

Then she began to make spots and to wander away from the design of the embroidery. The *patron* began once more to stamp his feet, and his wife was filled with a veritable despair. She tried to embroider herself.

"It can't be very difficult," she said.

On the contrary, it was very difficult, and despite her eagerness she had to give it up.

The *patron* pitied her. "Eh! Poor woman!" he said. "You can't do everything."

To see her so clever and courageous, it was impossible to imagine that there could be any kind of work which she could not do, and I was astonished that she could

not embroider as well as her husband, simply by sitting down at his machine.

From the second week onwards, the embroideress never did more than a few hours of good work. And on the last Saturday she was in such a state of drunkenness that we had to take her home. It was not easy to make her go down the stairs. She tried to escape from us, and to hit herself hard against the wall or the bannister.

I tried to preserve her from collisions, but Bergeounette prevented me.

"Let her crack herself," she said. "She is like an overfull barrel."

In the end we found an old embroiderer who had been a good workman in his time. He put on two pairs of spectacles to see better, and the *patron* marked out his designs more clearly.

VIII

Jacques was prowling in the avenue. Bergeounette who saw him from her place pointed him out to us. He walked with his head down, and his back seemed quite round.

After the funeral he had not gone home, and his wife had found him weeping in Sandrine's little room.

The neighbor, who knew nothing of Jacques's marriage, had told her all she knew of their love, of their sittings up together, and of their children. And the young woman, deeply offended, had left Paris to await her divorce.

One evening Jacques was still prowling round after the departure of the girls. Mme. Dalignac called him in with a sign. He walked all round the workshop, as if he hoped to find Sandrine in some corner; then he said, "I know quite well that she is no longer here. But it seems as though she is still here."

He had grown very thin, and he retained the look he had had on the day of the funeral.

He soon got into the habit of coming back. He came up some time before the departure of the girls, and he sat at the end of the room in order not to be in the way. He brought with him a sense of great mourning. And Bergeounette did not sing when she knew he was there.

Little by little, however, she forgot his presence, and it happened once that she sang this verse —

"Quand je vis Madeline
Pour la dernière fois,
Ses mains sur sa poitrine
Etaient posées en croix.
Elle était toute blanche." [1]

She stopped short, because the *patron* nudged her with his elbow, but Jacques went away almost immediately, and he came back no more.

Despite all our activity, we did not manage to satisfy our customers. Mme. Dalignac received letters of complaint that were a torture to her, and that obliged her to make endless excuses. The fatigue of overtime added to the other fatigues left her in a state of sick nervousness, which made her jump violently every time the doorbell rang.

One morning, having just opened the door, Duretour announced, "It's a gentleman."

Mme. Dalignac became quite pale, and she had much difficulty in speaking, when she said, "Whatever can the gentleman want with me?"

She was so much upset that her whole body gave way as if she were about to go off in a swoon. Then little Duretour said to her firmly: "What are you upsetting yourself like that for? The gentleman hasn't come to try on a dress."

[1] "When I saw Madeline for the last time, her hands were placed crosswise on her breast. She was all white."

Mme. Dalignac began to laugh, with a little pity for herself. She squared her shoulders, and went out to see the gentleman. He was a traveler in embroideries. She remained with him a few minutes only, and on her return she laughed once more at her motiveless anguish.

Our long evenings continued. We spent one night in every two finishing the most urgent work. There were nights so hard to endure that sleep in the end vanquished us, and the *patron* found us asleep with our heads on the table. We were all stiff with the cold, and the cheek which we had rested on our arm remained marked for a long time.

"You would do much better to lie down on the floor," the *patron* scolded.

And while we took up our work again, he went away to the kitchen to make us some very strong coffee. We drank the coffee in a few rapid mouthfuls. I found it sometimes so bitter that I could not prevent myself from making a grimace at it; but Mme. Dalignac said, "Bah! the taste doesn't matter. It's like putting oil into the machine."

An intimacy of confidence now bound us together. When our tiredness left us a little respite we talked open-heartedly, and the nights seemed less long to us.

I had not much to say about myself; but Mme. Dalignac confided her fears and troubles to me.

Her husband's illness did not make her very uneasy. She was convinced that a few months' rest in the country would quickly cure him, but she did not know what to do to give him this rest. Most of her customers made

her wait for her money, and, since the *patron* had stopped working, the money which came in was only just enough to pay the girls and meet the expenses of each day.

She was also interested in my future. She thought that it would not be long before I should be able to make dresses as well as the best of needlewomen.

"It's a nice trade," she said, "and there's a lot of women who make a living at it."

While she was speaking, I thought like her, and I wanted very much to become a clever dressmaker. But when she stopped speaking, the trade seemed to me to be dull and full of troubles. I forgot the dresses of every color and every shape that I never saw leave us except with regret, so great was my pleasure in them. I forgot even the intelligent and almost illuminated face of Mme. Dalignac, when she was composing her models, and I only remembered her torture when reproached by her customers, the continual discontent of Bouledogue, and the toil of all of us.

The last week of June was so blocked up with work that big Bergeounette offered to stay every evening until midnight. With her, overtime almost became an entertainment. She sang and told stories untiringly; and the *patron* remained behind to listen to her, instead of going to bed.

She remembered a quantity of queer refrains which she had heard the sailors sing. She imitated their uncertain voice at the closing of the public-house, and you could almost see them going back to their boat, wav-

ing their arms in the air and walking with tottering feet.

She spoke of her mother with some contempt, but the memory she retained of her father was full of mocking pity, and her voice had a break in it when she said to us, "He had no mischief in him, and he thought of nothing but drinking and singing."

She told all sorts of funny stories about him. And even when speaking of his death she could not prevent herself from laughing.

He had a mania for going down the well which was not deep and which dried up in summer. Nobody knew how he got down into it, but, once at the bottom, he made shrill cries, for some one to come and help him up again. One day he drowned himself because the well had filled up as the result of a big storm.

And Bergeounette asserted, "I'm certain that he is in heaven, although he died without confession." We laughed and midnight came quickly.

During the day, we had neither story nor song, and yet the hours passed with a rapidity that astonished everybody.

Abruptly, an anxious voice would say, "Five o'clock already!"

And breathing would become noisier, and a too fidgety leg would stretch out suddenly beneath the table.

Our sole moments of respite were occasioned by Roberte's grimaces and Duretour's teasings.

Roberte asserted that she was a Parisian, but nobody

believed her. She had a coarse accent which she tried to hide by imitating the dragging speech of the suburbs. And when she happened to let slip a word of dialect, Duretour asked her, "What part of the country do you come from?"

Roberte blinked her eyes hastily, as if she were afraid of having forgotten the name of her province, and she always replied, "I'm a Parisian, but not from Montparnasse."

"So I should think," replied Duretour, laughing in her face.

At other times, Duretour amused herself by throwing bits of material on to her head, and, to make her stop, Roberte cried in a loud and threatening voice, "Get out! Get out!"

This reminded me of a cowman of my village crying after his cows, to prevent them from browsing on the shoots of young trees. And my laughter joined that of the others.

We knew that after the days of the great races, the work would be less toilsome, and that kept up our courage. Little by little, Bouledogue stopped growling, and Mme. Dalignac seemed to breathe more freely.

But there, two days before the Grand Prix, just when most of our orders were about to be delivered, a customer arrived with an immense noise.

Duretour recognized her by the way she pulled the bell. "It's Mme. Linella," she said.

Mme. Linella was a very pretty and very well-built customer, who trusted in Mme. Dalignac's good taste,

but who always ordered her dresses at the last moment. However, as we had just made specially for her, for the day of the Grand Prix, a magnificent red dress embroidered all over, nobody was worried by her arrival.

She entered the workroom in spite of Duretour, who tried to stand in her way, and she said very quickly to Mme. Dalignac, "I know that you're busy, and I don't want to waste your time."

She leant against the table to explain.

"It's a white dress I want. Make the skirt very clinging and the blouse very full, without embroidery, because I want to be the only one on the field who hasn't any."

She stopped to take breath, and added curtly: "And you will bring it to me on Sunday morning before ten o'clock."

"You're asking for the impossible; it can't be done in the time," Mme. Dalignac replied without looking at her.

The customer's eyes hardened, as if she were about to lose her temper.

"What's that?" she said. She softened however. "Without that dress I shan't be able to go to Longchamps."

And she continued to insist on the extreme need she had of an unembroidered dress for that special day.

Mme. Dalignac made no further answer. She simply went on making a gesture of refusal with her head. Then Mme. Linella tried coaxing.

"Come now! You'll work a little overtime, and it's done!"

Mme. Dalignac laughed in a way that drew down the corners of her mouth. She raised her elbow with a jaded air, as if to push her customer away, and just when we thought she was going to refuse once more she let fall her arm, and promised to make the dress by Sunday morning.

There was a murmuring among us, but Mme. Linella was already on her way to the door. She came back to say, "I've just had an idea for the blouse. You'll put just a touch of blue at the neck and waist."

She went off only to return again. "Above all, make me sleeves that don't look like sleeves."

And this time, she was gone for good. The *patron* immediately asked his wife, "You won't make the dress, eh?"

"How do I know," replied Mme. Dalignac. And over her face there passed a look of discouragement so intense that you would have said that she was going to weep. But it did not last long; her eyes had that absent and preoccupied expression in them which came when she had a difficult dress to invent, and the anxious words of the *patron* did not seem to reach her.

In the workshop, we laughed at the customer.

"It's a long way off, that white dress of hers," said Duretour.

"Nobody's preventing her from running after it," sneered Bergeounette.

Bouledogue, her nose all wrinkled up in anger, muttered, "There's a limit to everything."

In the evening, when I was alone with Mme. Dalignac, she said to me, "By working all night Saturday, we should perhaps manage to make Mme. Linella's dress."

I pushed out my lips as a sign of doubt. I felt very tired, and, moreover, I feared that I should not be of much help, for I foresaw that the dress would be all lace and muslin, and I had very little skill with that kind of work.

She went on as though she had guessed my thoughts, "You could do the skirt, which will be of soft material, and I will do the blouse."

I did not reply. I thought of the red dress on which we had already worked late, and an anger like Bouledogue's against this capricious customer came to me.

Mme. Dalignac went on again, "It will be the last night we shall spend like that."

She waited a moment before she said, as if to herself, "How can we get out of it, now that I have promised?"

Her anguished voice made me forget in a trice all my ill-will. I understood that she would do her very best to satisfy her customer, and that nothing would prevent her from working another night. Then I promised not to leave her alone and to help her with all my courage.

The dress was not yet cut when Mme. Linella came to try it on, and she had to wait more than an hour.

After her departure, while the others were finishing what had to be sent home the same evening, I took out the trial pins, and I basted the skirt with the colored threads that were to guide me.

Bouledogue blew strongly through her nose, and Bergeounette hummed the refrain which an old beggar sang beneath the windows of the workshop —

"Elle avait ce jour-là mis une robe blanche,
Où flottait, pour ceinture, un large ruban bleu." [1]

Little Duretour left last. Her pretty face was full of pity, when she offered to come in, on the following morning, to take home the dress.

The light of day still illuminated the avenue, when Mme. Dalignac brought the lighted lamp to the table. She drew up a stool facing me, and the night's work began.

The hours passed; a church clock counted them one by one without forgetting the quarters and the half-hours, and the sounds entered the open window as if their mission were to remind us that we had not a minute to lose.

The twelve strokes of midnight echoed for so long that Mme. Dalignac went and shut the window, as she sometimes shut the door behind a customer who demanded too much. But the hours that followed did not tire. They passed through the window-panes, and their shrill sounds made a ceaseless call on our attention.

[1] "She had put on that day a white dress, on which fluttered a belt of wide blue ribbon."

Now and then, Mme. Dalignac was overcome by sleep. She let go of her needle suddenly and her head fell forward, and to see her thus you would have said that she was looking attentively into the palm of her right hand, which remained half-open on her work.

At these times I gave her a little push with my finger, and the smile that she gave me was full of confusion.

For some time, the trams had stopped passing down the avenue. Even the cabs had ceased, and, in the silence which now spread over the town, the church clock suddenly counted three. Mme. Dalignac sat upright, while from her mouth escaped a short breath. She put down her work, and got up painfully to go and make tea.

The moment she went out, I perceived that the lamp was running low. It rapidly went lower and lower, and it gave me a feeling of real anguish. I turned it up with a sharp movement, but, instead of increasing its light, it only threw out a long flame mingled with sparks, and, as if it had just used up in one effort the whole of its reserves, it went cluck, cluck, and died out.

It was like being overwhelmed by a catastrophe, and, for a moment, I thought that all was lost. I turned to the window for help, but I was so upset that I seemed to see through the panes a wide cloth worked with silver. I recognized almost immediately the sky and the remainder of its waning stars. At the same time, I understood that the day was breaking, and that the lamp was becoming useless. Then I let my body huddle into rest, and I yielded to the immense desire for a few minutes' sleep.

Mme. Dalignac woke me up by returning with the tea. She complained of the nasty smell which the charred wick made in the room, and she reopened the window, saying, " The fresh air will do us good."

I shivered when the fresh air touched me. At that moment, I would have preferred all the nasty smells to that pure air which brought me a livelier suffering. However, I got used to it little by little, and soon I was myself leaning on my elbows at the window.

All the stars had disappeared. The sky was a bluish gray. And away in the east, little pink clouds went in flocks to meet the sun.

Near at hand, beneath the high glass roof of Montparnasse Station, a locomotive whistled softly, as if it were secretly calling somebody. Others arrived, sliding silently along the rails, and flinging out a sharp, clear whistle like a glad morning greeting.

Below, the milk-carts were beginning to come noisily down the avenue, and the ragpickers were already rummaging in the dustbins.

Mme. Dalignac poured out the tea. She poured it out gently to avoid splashes, and it flowed so black from the teapot that you would have taken it for coffee. It did not at once give us the energy we expected of it. On the contrary, its heat wrapped us in a feeling of comfort and weakened us, but half-past three sounded forcefully in our ears, and before the full light of day had come, I had taken up my skirt and Mme. Dalignac her blouse.

Against my will, I turned my eyes towards the confusion of lace and muslin which was to form the sleeves of Mme. Linella's blouse. Mme. Dalignac made them up first of all with lace; then she pinned on muslin, which she rejected for more lace. Nothing satisfied her, and at each change she repeated mechanically these words, which sounded as loudly in my ears as the striking of the hours: "Sleeves that don't look like sleeves."

She at last came to a decision, and, after an hour's work, she stood away from the model to judge the effect better. But when she turned to me to ask my opinion, as she often did, she saw that I was already looking at the sleeves, and without my saying a word, she retreated to the wall, and began to weep. She wept flabbily, and said inarticulately, "I'm too tired; I can't do any good."

She remained leaning against the wall for a moment, her face hidden in her hands. Then, as if she had really come to the end of her strength and courage, she gave way suddenly and fell upon her knees.

She tried to get up, but the weight of her head was too heavy, and her hands remained glued to the floor. She gave one more start, like a person trying to avoid sleep; but in the same movement, her elbows doubled up and she rolled over on to her side.

I thought that she had fainted, and I jumped up hastily to go to her help, but leaning over her I saw that she was in deep sleep. She slept with her mouth open, and her breathing was harsh and regular.

I slipped a roll of lining beneath her head, and fearing to go to sleep like her I passed a damp cloth over my face.

"Sleeves that don't look like sleeves."

I looked at them for a long time, then I undid them, and, after having folded the muslin, adjusted the insertion and arranged the lace, I stood away in turn from the model to judge the effect. Six o'clock struck at that moment, and the *patron* entered the workshop with his yellow complexion and his dishevelled hair. He walked round the blouse, making gestures of admiration, and he said, pointing to his wife, "She can sleep now; she has done well."

And off he went quickly to the kitchen. Mme. Dalignac awoke at the noise.

She could not believe that her sleeves were made. She touched them one after the other with a timorous air, as if she feared to see them disappear suddenly. She also tried to speak, but she had lost her voice.

I did not speak either. I felt that the slightest word would bring with it additional fatigue, and I made signs to show what remained to be done.

I went back to my place. The sun passing over the new house sought to frame itself in a pane of the window and blinded me. My eyelids closed, and for a moment sleep crushed me. Then a sort of numbness seized me. It seemed to me that a great hole was forming in my chest, and there was nothing left in me but the fixed idea that the dress must be delivered at all costs before ten o'clock.

IX

On Monday morning the workshop was clean and without a shred of material lying about. There were only the threads and the hooks and the eyes mingled in the basket. Bouledogue, who did not like waiting, asked as soon as she was seated, "What have I got to do now?"

And immediately the others put the same question.

Mme. Dalignac unrolled a pink cloth on her table, and it was the *patron* who replied good-humoredly, "I say! Hé? My wife has been asleep all night instead of cutting out dresses." He pointed to the entangled threads. "Amuse yourselves by straightening that out!" he said.

Mme. Dalignac was still looking extremely tired. She was doubled up on herself, and seemed unable to bear the weight of her body, which she leaned against anything within reach.

There was a long silence. The old embroiderer and I were inundating our machines with petrol to clean them of dirt and grease, and the girls disentangled and wound up the threads with a sprightliness that seemed to betoken a fear of losing time. Then the workshop was again filled with voices. Every one gave an account of how she had spent her Sunday. Duretour had dragged her sweetheart to the races with the sole

object of making certain that Mme. Linella had not worn her white dress.

The day before, after having taken the dress home, she had returned in haste to inform us that the lady's-maid had said to her, "Don't undo the parcel. I'll put it in the wardrobe."

And now, she was as gay as a street-urchin, as she told us what she had done to make herself recognized by our customer, who had become as red as her dress perceiving her.

Bouledogue had not even gone to the ball. She had spent her day washing and ironing the under-linen of two weeks. And when the *patron* said to her that she would have done better to rest, she replied without growling, "A change of work rests you."

Nor had Bergeounette gone to the races. She had prowled round the churches of her neighborhood as was her wont.

The *patron* could not believe that she could remain quiet the whole length of a Mass, and Bergeounette confessed that it gave her no pleasure to kneel for prayer. But the resplendent altars, the magnificent vestments of the priests, and the broad chant of the organs gave her a contentment she never tired of.

To-day, she wanted principally to say that she had seen me standing against a pillar of Notre-Dame-des-Champs. She was sure that I was not praying, since I had my nose in the air, but, in spite of this, she had not succeeded in attracting my attention.

Duretour, who had never entered a church, cried out,

"She was waiting for a sweetheart to fall down to her from heaven."

I generally took little notice of chaff, but when Bergeounette had finished turning to ridicule my appearance of thinking of nothing, I could not prevent myself from making fun of her by saying that I had seen her all right on her arrival in the church, where she had changed places more than twenty times in a quarter of an hour. And while she showed astonishment at my reply, I took advantage of it to add: "At that moment you scarcely had time to think of me; you were too occupied in kneeling about all over the place."

Duretour, who had cried out on me, did the same on Bergeounette.

"She was playing at hide and seek," she said, "with the angels."

The *patron* interposed his word, "Té! Her prayers were no longer than a halleluia, I should say."

The workshop overflowed with laughter, and Bergeounette jumped about and laughed louder than anybody. Nobody thought of past fatigues, or of the caprices of beautiful customers, who make workgirls keep up all night in order to have one more dress in their wardrobe. Mme. Dalignac herself seemed to have recovered her strength, and her gentle face was full of light. And while she busied herself preparing the work, Bergeounette continued to amuse us with a story of her childhood.

She loved the little church of her village so much that she always arrived first at the catechism. But she

could not remain quiet, and she always quarreled with her companions.

The old curé scolded her; then he clasped his hands as if he were asking God for patience to bear with her, and, when he could stand it no longer, he sent her to sit with the boys.

And Bergeounette told this story.

"It was a little before the end of the catechism. The smack I had just given to my neighbor sounded so loud that the girls all got up to see where it came from. The old curé got up too, much more quickly than I thought him capable of, and he pushed me as far as the dark place below the staircase that led to the steeple. I didn't dare move first of all, for fear of falling into some hole, but I soon caught sight of a thick rope hanging near me, and, to imitate the sailors, I tried to climb it. It wasn't easy; my sabots slipped on the rope, and I kept falling down. But suddenly above my head the bell rang once, then again, then once more, as if it were tolling a knell. I stopped jumping at the rope to listen, but at the same moment the curé dragged me from my hiding-place, crying indignantly, 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' The bell stopped ringing, and the children ran up jostling one another, while the curé could find no more to say than, 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' He opened the church door, and I came out among boys and girls running and laughing and shouting as they had never done before in the village."

And Bergeounette added, without laughing, "When

my mother put me across her knee she didn't toll any knell, but a fine holiday peal."

The week did not bring with it the peace we had expected. We counted the dresses that still remained to be done, and Bergeounette began to be frightened at the idea that there would soon be no more work. Moreover, the *patron* seemed to get still weaker, and he could hardly bear the noise of the machines. Mme. Dalignac began to prepare for their departure to the Pyrenees. M. Bon had advised this, in the hope that the sick man would recover more quickly in his native air.

She spent a part of her time running from one customer to another, to get paid for her work, but she often returned tired, upset and without money. In the evening I helped her to make out her invoices, and, while turning over the leaves of the account-book, I was astonished at the large number of accounts which had not been settled for years. Yet the same customers continued to have their dresses made by us. Some of them were even very exacting, and only paid for their new clothes with small sums at long intervals.

I added up the amounts lost in this way, and I could not repress a tone of reproach as I said, "This money would be very useful to you now. It would enable your husband to rest a long while, and perhaps recover altogether."

Her eyes widened and became very attentive. She looked into space, as if she had suddenly perceived an

easy way to achieve her end more quickly; but she lowered her eyes immediately, and her mouth and chin gave a little twitch, as when you want to laugh and cry at the same time; then she bent her head, and said in great shame, "I've never been able to claim what is due to me."

An immense pity for her came to me. I was ashamed in turn at having obliged her to humiliate herself, and I pushed the account-book away from me angrily, as if it were that which had reproved her.

The idea of leaving Paris was unbearable to the *patron*. He gazed endlessly at the balconies of the new house, which the sun lighted and warmed. The middle one especially attracted his attention. It stood out broad and round like an enormous stomach, and Bouledogue asserted that it was twice as large as the room she lived in with her grandmother.

The *patron* said to his wife: "You know, if it were ours, you could make a tent for me on it with a sheet, and I could remain all day lying on the warm stone."

"But, since we are going to the Pyrenees," replied Mme. Dalignac.

"The Pyrenees. . . . The Pyrenees," grumbled the *patron*, making a grimace.

From the second week of July work failed altogether. Never had the slack season begun so soon. It was like a disaster to us all.

Bergeounette moved about jerkily, and Bouledogue,

who forgot to show her teeth, rolled up her apron in a newspaper with an air of profound discouragement.

In spite of her many troubles, Mme. Dalignac would not leave without giving the little entertainment at which each year she united her family and her work-girls. And, in agreement with the *patron,* she chose for it the day on which her nephew Clément was to come home on leave.

I had never seen Clément, who was doing his military service in a garrison some distance from Paris, but I had often heard speak of him. Trifling arguments about him would take place between Mme. Dalignac and her husband. The *patron* would have preferred to see him a little less self-willed and obstinate, while his wife called it firmness of character.

"He'll be a real man," she said, laughing. One day, speaking of an accident in which she might have lost her life, she had added, "Luckily Clément was there. With him I had nothing to fear."

The *patron,* who was at the other end of the work-shop, had turned to reply with an irritated air, "Eh? Stop it! If he hadn't been there, wouldn't I have saved you?"

Mme. Dalignac had laughed softly, stretching out her open hand to her husband, and this affectionate gesture was at the same time so full of protection that the *patron* had bent his head as if the hand touched him really, and he could lean against it.

Clément had two sisters, Eglantine and Rose. These were all the relations remaining to Mme. Dalignac.

She had taken them in at the death of their parents, when the girls were already fourteen and fifteen years of age, and Clément was still only an urchin of ten.

Rose, the elder, had married a Paris guard. She was elegant and a coquette, and spent all her time adorning herself and her children. Eglantine lived with the young household. She loved and looked after her sister's little ones with a limitless devotion, and the *patron* said that their true mother was not Rose. It could be easily seen that the *patron* preferred Eglantine to Rose, but it could also be seen that his wife loved Clément more than Eglantine.

When I arrived to help Mme. Dalignac in the arrangement of the dinner-party, Clément was already there.

He looked as spick and span as a new article, and I saw immediately that his smile was full of self-assurance. He, too, stared at me, and it seemed to me that, in shaking hands, he held mine longer than was necessary.

He was occupied in emptying the workshop to make more room. Nothing troubled him. He pushed back the dummies' faces to the wall, pressing them closely together, and he placed on top an enormous pile of cardboard boxes. He was lithe in his movements, and his well-fitting clothes followed them all.

As he joined the two tables together to make one of them, he pointed out each one's place to me.

"Above all," he said, "put the kiddies next to Eglantine, and don't forget to place Rose near her husband."

Mme. Dalignac laughed with him, and her face showed such perfect serenity that it seemed that no care would ever disturb it any more.

The meal was composed of solid foods. Each dish was greeted with frank gayety, and funny sayings set the people laughing from one end of the table to the other.

The large mirror over the mantelpiece reflected the round head and the straight back of Clément. And it made the complexion of his sister Rose seem still more glowing.

Eglantine constantly leaned over one or other of the children, and for the greater part of the time I saw of her face only a thin cheek and two fresh lips pushed forward for a kiss.

She did not resemble her brother, and still less her sister, who was beautiful and very different.

I could not see the *patron,* but I heard his accent through the other voices.

"Give me another little bit, hé?"

It was Bergeounette who sang the first song at the dessert. Bouledogue followed her. Her powerful, vibrant voice held everybody.

Roberte, who came after, sang and wriggled about in doing so in such a way that Duretour escaped into the kitchen in order that her laughter might not provoke that of the others. And while Rose proudly struck an attitude before she opened her mouth, Eglantine kept herself in an awkward position in order not to disturb

one of the little ones who had gone to sleep on her knees.

Clément required pressing, when the *patron* said to him, "Sing us *The Wine of Marsala.*"

I thought it was a drinking-song, but when Clément got up to sing, he put on so serious an air that I was immediately all attention.

He sought for the first words and began —

"J'étais un jour seul dans la plaine,
Quand je vis en face de moi,
Un soldat de vingt ans à peine,
Qui portait les couleurs du roi." [1]

All eyes turned towards him, and every elbow rested on the table as he attacked the refrain and shouted —

"Ah! que maudite soit la guerre." [2]

Then the verses poured out one after the other, telling at length the story of death —

"Ah! je ne chantai pas victoire,
Mais je lui demandai pardon.
Il avait soif, je le fis boire." [3]

Clément's voice went up and down with inflexions that made our bosoms heave higher and higher. We followed him while he ran to bring help to the wounded man; we leant with him to look for the wound and

[1] "I was one day alone in the plain, when I saw before me a soldier of scarcely twenty years, who carried the king's colors."

[2] "Ah! cursed be war."

[3] "Ah! I did not sing out victory, but I asked his pardon. He was thirsty, I gave him drink."

stanch it, and everybody saw clearly the portrait of the old lady which the young soldier carried against his heart.

Therefore, when Clément sang that his regret for this death would last as long as his life, all our voices united with his to fling out like a great cry of hatred —

"Ah! que maudite soit la guerre."

There was no applause as with the other songs. Clément sat down a little out of breath. He had put such spirit into his song that you would have thought that he really had just killed a man in the plain. The sparkling of his eyes must even have troubled himself, for he shut them several times.

The silence went on. It seemed that a mysterious fear had just entered the room, and was prowling round the table to drive away our gayety. Elbows remained on the cloth, but every clenched fist became a support on which faces full of seriousness rested heavily.

The *patron* turned to Bergeounette to bring back our high spirits, but Bergeounette retained an engrossed air, and it was with an indifferent voice that she sang an old sad song.

We separated noisily.

I helped Eglantine to put on the children's cloaks, while their mother assured herself before the glass that her own sat well on her.

The following day was the day of departure. It was also the eve of the Fête Nationale. Flags floated

at all the windows of the avenue, and urchins were already letting off crackers on the pavements.

I found Mme. Dalignac in the middle of her half-packed trunks. Clément bustled about her. He was clever with his hands, and found the right spot straight away.

Mme. Dalignac followed him with affectionate eyes; and when he lifted and carried downstairs the two heavy trunks, without bending beneath their weight, she said to him with a little admiration, "You're fit enough to be married now."

The platforms of the station were crowded with people who jostled each other in order to get into the carriages, which were full already. The *patron* allowed himself to be knocked about from all sides. He seemed stiff, and did not say a word. However, when he had entered his compartment he stretched out his hand to me.

"Good-by, little one," he said.

"Au revoir, *patron,* not good-by," I replied, laughing.

He looked at me fixedly. "Really!" he said. "You think I shall return then?"

His voice was so different from what it had been the moment before that I was struck with surprise. I did not have time to reply to him. A porter who was running alongside the train, pushed me away, and shut the door with a bang.

The *patron* tried to lower the window, but it stuck, and the train was beginning to start.

Through the window I saw his eyes; they were full

of questionings, and his wife's were fearful and anxious. Then the two faces became blurred with the woodwork and the bars of copper, and the train took the curve, making a loud noise on the turn-tables as it passed.

X

THE great stretch of Paris beneath my window was bright that evening with thousands and thousands of lights. From square to square the public monuments were shining, and they increased the brightness still more. Nearer to me, the church of Notre-Dame-des-Champs was garlanded with colored lamps, while Montparnasse Station was encircled by a band of gaslight which made a kind of white belt round it. And farther off, high up above the town, a red light descended slowly, seeming to slip from heaven like a broad curtain of silk.

The 14th of July was beginning its night festival.

My aged neighbor tapped on my door as she did each Saturday or each holiday eve, and her shrill voice asked, "Are you there, Marie Claire?"

I went to light the lamp, but she prevented me. She knocked against the table which was in the middle of the room, and groping her way she took the chair I pulled forward for her.

She was scarcely seated when she said, "There! I'm done. My last customer has just gone to the seaside."

There was a large content in her voice. But immediately afterwards she said fearfully that she would be two months without earning anything. And as if she

perceived in one glimpse all the privations of the slack season, she said in a low voice, "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Mlle. Herminie was more than seventy years old, and her body was so tiny that it could be compared to that of a girl of thirteen. She earned her living as a clothes-mender, but the greater part of her time she was compelled to stay at home, she suffered so much from her stomach. During the summer holidays she was often without means, and it was a miracle how she went on living.

One of her hands was now resting on the window-ledge, and the other made a little bright spot on her black dress.

In turn, I spoke of the departure of the Dalignacs and of the long slack season in front of me. And once again she said in a low voice, "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Joyful noises mounted up from the neighboring streets and from the boulevard. You might almost have said that these noises recognized each other as they met, and that they mingled blithely to break out with greater force.

On all sides rockets were flying and bursting beneath the stars, while colored fires flared and smoked in dark corners.

Then the music of an open air ball was heard. The sounds struck the houses and reached us half broken. And from time to time a flag we could not see flapped suddenly.

We were silent. The fresh air coming from the west touched our faces and brought us a sort of peace. And

for a long, long time during this night of festival, my old neighbor remained by my side listening to the noise of other people's joy.

The first weeks of the holidays were sweet to us. It was as if each day was still Sunday. Mlle. Herminie discovered that we did not have too much time doing nothing, and she no longer complained of her stomach.

She wanted to take me out for a walk, but she had not the habit of walking any more than I had. We hurried along as if we were going to work, and we returned tired and harassed by the crowded streets. Therefore, after a few days, when one asked, "Shall we go out to-day?" the other replied, "We're all right here." And we spent our days cleaning and mending.

Mlle. Herminie had a quick and playful mind, but she would never acknowledge that she was wrong. On the day when I pointed out to her that she always found the right word for her own defense, she replied, "When you are weak in body you must have a strong tongue."

Her sallies made me laugh, and I paid no heed to her occasional surliness. She feared death more than anything, and no wretchedness and no suffering could make her desire it. At ordinary times she struggled against illness, but as soon as she felt worse, she became afraid and said, "I don't mind suffering, providing I live."

I always felt at ease with her. We were almost always in agreement; our different ages mingled together,

and we felt old or young according as to whether there was sadness or laughter between us.

To lessen our expenses it occurred to us to take our meals in common. Our cooking was not difficult. We ate potatoes and haricots more than anything else. Every other day Mlle. Herminie had a thin, narrow cutlet which I grilled on the embers of the little stove. It often happened that the cutlet served for two meals. She cut away the middle, and left the rest on her plate, saying, "I'll keep the bone for this evening."

She took an infinite time to eat the mouthfuls, which she cut up fine as for a very small child. She had only two long and useless teeth in her jaws, which stuck out at the bottom at each corner of her mouth, and which made me think of the fence of a field of which only two worm-eaten stakes remained, leaning sideways.

The great heats of summer came with the month of August. We kept door and window open; nevertheless, there were hours in which the heat was so sultry that we went and sat on the stairs in the hope of a draught.

Mlle. Herminie suffered most at night. She stifled in her room, which was all length and no breadth. Her window was so far away at the end of the two walls that it seemed to be desirous of flying from the narrow room.

The old woman had a veritable hatred of these two walls, which lowered over the middle of the room. She spoke to them as to living and maleficent beings, and when I laughed at her anger, she said with wrathful eyes, "It's they that prevent the air from entering."

She had lived there for more than thirty years, and never had anything been changed. Her bedstead, which had been broken on the day she moved in, remained in a corner unset awaiting repair. Her spring mattress, which lay on the floor and which had a hole in the middle, was covered by a palliasse which sank down into the hole.

"There's no danger of my falling out of bed with it like that," she used to say, laughing.

There was also hidden behind the door an old wardrobe with a looking-glass front. The feet had had to be cut off in order to get it in. This gave it a wretched and ridiculous air, and it always seemed to me that the wardrobe remained on its knees in order not to knock its head against the ceiling.

Mlle. Herminie lived as much in my room as in her own. If my room was not much bigger than hers it was much less crowded, and there was nothing to prevent you from approaching the window.

In the evening we heard our neighbors descending for a breath of fresh air on the boulevard. We had tried to do as they did, but the dust raised by vehicles and pedestrians made the air thicker and more unpleasant than it was upstairs. We were always best at home.

The open door let in the light from the gas-bracket on the staircase, and when our neighbors returned the shadow of their head always entered the room, as if it had come to see what was happening.

When we had nothing to say and we were tired of the

silence, my old neighbor made me sing one of the prettiest of Bergeounette's songs —

"Un beau navire à la riche carène." [1]

I sang in a low voice for us alone. Mlle. Herminie took up the refrain with me —

"Si tu le vois, dis-lui que je l'adore." [2]

Her thin, trembling voice did not reach beyond the window.

Sometimes our evenings were lengthy. This was when we both talked about our native place. Mlle. Herminie spoke of hers as something belonging absolutely to her, which she should have possessed all her life.

Her voice became strong as she named the towns and the villages all surrounded by vines which could be seen as far as the eye could reach from the top of Saint-Jacques Hill. She had not forgotten the noise of the presses nor the smell of new wine which spread over the town at the time of grape-gathering. She retained, too, a gay memory of the noisy disputes of the vintagers.

"Oh!" she said. "In my parts, the lads fight first and explain afterwards, and everything is all right."

She had never been back to her part of the country since she had left it. But her greatest desire was to see it once more. Often she said to me, "You see, Marie

[1] "A fine ship with a rich keel."
[2] "If you see him, tell him that I adore him."

Claire, those who haven't seen Burgundy don't know what a fine country it is."

And as though she had suddenly been transported there, she rediscovered new corners of it, which she carefully described to me. I listened to her, and it seemed to me that none of the roads she spoke of were unknown to me. I climbed with her the Saint-Jacques Hill, which gave so wonderful a wine that the children drank of it only on national holidays. I walked through the vines, which became so yellow in autumn that the countryside had the appearance of being made of gold, and I went into the immense cellars where the barrels were lined up and piled on top of one another by hundreds.

Mlle. Herminie was a little contemptuous of her customers who went to the seaside instead of going to Burgundy, and she took pity on me because my Sologne produced only pines and buckwheat.

I felt, because of it, that my poverty was still greater, and confronted by the riches which she had just displayed, and which surrounded me on all sides, I did not dare to say more about the flowering heaths or the freshness of the shaded roads of my countryside.

In the second week of the holidays we had to reduce our expenses. We had suppressed the early morning breakfast and the midday cup of coffee. Then the evening soup was suppressed in its turn and replaced by dry bread.

Mlle. Herminie began to complain again of her stom-

ach, and sometimes she confessed in the morning, "Last night I drank a large glass of water to stay my hunger."

On Sunday, the staircase filled with kitchen odors. You could smell hot meat, golden crusts and wines strong in alcohol. It pleased us as much as if we were taking part in the feast. And my old neighbor said to me quite satisfied, "Luckily, somebody's eating."

One afternoon Clément appeared in the open doorway. He was not wearing his uniform, and it was some moments before I recognized him. He came in without ceremony, and held out his hand; and he made a vague gesture when I asked him why he had come.

It annoyed me a little to see him there, and I withdrew my hand, which once again he held too long. Mlle. Herminie had risen immediately to return to her own room, and as Clément seemed to wish to take her place, I left the chair and stood by the window.

He came up to it and leaned on the handrail. He began several sentences without finishing them; then his fingers flicked impatiently, and suddenly he seized the shoulder-straps of my apron, saying, "That's it! I think you're very pretty."

I was so astonished that I raised my eyes quickly to his. He did not lower his, but the look in them showed some uneasiness. His eyelids went up, and discovered all the white above the pupil.

He went on, pulling more strongly on the shoulder-strap of my apron, "Yes, I think you're very pretty."

By the way he emphasized the words he said clearly that he alone could think this, but that the opinion of other people did not trouble him.

There was a slight pause, and then his voice went on again. He spoke as people do who are in haste to be approved. He united our two futures as one, as if to hold them better in his hand and to direct them as he wished. But while he described what our life together would be when I had become his wife I forgot his presence, and I no longer even heard the sound of his voice.

The houses and the streets disappeared as well; heaths and pines rose up in their place. And there, before me, amidst hollybush and wild hazel trees, a man stood motionless and looked at me.

I recognized his large, gentle eyes, the pupils of which joined the eyelids, and which seemed like two timid birds resting on me with confidence. Then the eyes and the heaths changed into precious stones and scattered over the returning roofs, while Clément said, raising his voice, "I see quite well that you don't love me. But what does that matter? You will love me when we are married."

I tried to reply to him, but he held his face so close to mine that it seemed to me there was not room enough for my words. His breath made my cheeks hot, and his hand was very heavy on my shoulder.

I found myself with him near the stairs, without knowing how we had come there. He leaned a moment against the bannister before saying, "I'm not a bad

sort." He hesitated a little before adding, "And you aren't happy, that's plain."

When he had descended a dozen stairs he turned round and smiled at me, as though we understood one another on all things. And as he disappeared, I saw that his neck was compact and well set between his shoulders.

Mlle. Herminie did not question me. She simply said with a smile, "I had forgotten that you were of an age to be married."

Clément's fixed pupils came back to my mind's eye, and I replied at once, "I'm not in love with anybody."

Mlle. Herminie's smile disappeared. She raised her pointed chin towards me, and in a voice I did not know, she said, "Children bring so much happiness that all painful memories are soon wiped out."

I shook my head doubtfully. Then she stretched out her arms, trying to erect a bust harder than wood, and, as if she were exposing herself to the eyes of the whole world, she said, with a laugh full of irony, "Look at me, then. The memory of my lost love seems to me more precious than anything."

Her face expressed an immense regret, and, for the first time, I saw that her lips were still full and fresh.

She let fall her thin arms, adding hollowly, "You become like something dead . . . and the others drift away from you."

The evening passed away in silence, and I went to bed harassed, as if I had walked for hours on a bad

road. My sleep, too, was not good. I dreamed that a hurricane was carrying me away into the air. I assembled all my strength to resist the fury of the winds; but their whirlings tore my clothes from me one by one, and large drops of rain froze my naked body.

My tranquillity left me. My open door gave me a constant anxiety, and to prevent myself from being overcome by the vexation of it, I decided to look for work while waiting for the return of Mme. Dalignac.

Each morning I went to the places where I knew there would be notices up. I met young women there who, like me, had hollow cheeks and shabby clothes. Young women with children in their arms also came. The little ones scratched at the dirty papers, and stuffed bits of them into their mouths.

Sometimes an urchin of thirteen or fourteen stopped as he passed. He smiled at the young mothers, and looked boldly at the girls. Then he tiptoed to write with a blue pencil on the white part of the notices, and he went off with his hands in his pocket and dragging his feet along the pavement. And behind him you could read —

"WANTED
A good Sempstress for Adam's Costume."

The young mothers laughed noisily and went away, dancing their chubby babies at the end of their arms.

Before the notices at Saint-Denis Gate, I found the pretty chambermaid with bonnet and white apron. She

was watching for workgirls, and she spoke to them as if she had situations to offer them. Some of them looked at her distrustfully, and went off without listening to her, while others appeared to be delighted with what she proposed.

I saw her come up to me with some fear. I thought of the looks of those who had not allowed themselves to be approached, and I wanted to run after them to escape her.

She said to me amiably, "My mistress has work for all young women. She is not exacting, and pays very well."

I felt reassured, but I remembered Bouledogue's rough hands, and I asked, "Is it work that ruins the hands?"

Her laughter at this shocked me, and I explained timidly, "I am a sempstress, and I don't want to go into a factory."

"Just the thing," she said; "it so happens that my mistress needs a sempstress."

The dimples in her cheeks became deeper, as though she were repressing a desire to laugh. However, she became serious as she pulled from her pocket a visiting-card. But before handing it to me, she asked hastily, as if she had forgotten to put the question sooner, "You're not married, I suppose?"

The sharp look which she gave me brought back all my fears, and I replied, "Yes."

She insisted: "Really married?"

"Yes."

I replied so quickly that I astonished myself, but at the same time I experienced the kind of pleasure that one feels after having jumped aside to avoid being knocked down by a cab.

The pretty woman's eyes searched my face; then they descended to the thin circle of gold which I wore on my left hand, and, when she raised them, they were filled with a profound contempt for the whole of my person. She put the card back into the pocket of her apron, and went after another young woman.

While I was returning slowly through the streets, Clément's image seemed to walk before me. I had thought of him when replying that I was married, and now his firm shoulders seemed to me like something against which I could lean in all security. His last words came back to my memory: "I'm not a bad sort, and you aren't happy either."

Then it was his strong voice on the day of the dinner which came singing into my ears. The beginning of one verse haunted me especially —

> "Je voulus panser sa blessure,
> J'ouvris son uniforme blanc."[1]

No, he could not be a bad sort, and he had grown up with Mme. Dalignac.

As I climbed the stairs once more, Mlle. Herminie's words whirled through my mind: "You become like something dead, and the others drift away from you."

[1] "I wanted to stanch his wound, I opened his white uniform."

She was waiting for me as she did every day. Her affectionate smile and her pure eyes made me forget the coarse laughter and the piercing eyes of the pretty chambermaid, and I could not explain my fears regarding her.

Nor did Mlle. Herminie understand my mistrust, and we spent the remainder of the day regretting that mistress who was not exacting and who paid well.

On the following day I found work with a woman who made children's clothes. She gave the small dresses to workgirls who had a sewing-machine at home, but she insisted on having a domiciliary certificate signed by the magistrate.

I returned joyously, although I had neither certificate nor sewing-machine. I knew that Mme. Dalignac would not refuse to lend me the one in the workshop. And to celebrate the good news, I prepared a lovely milk soup for our dinner.

XI

Instead of the reply which I was expecting from Mme. Dalignac, she came herself. Her face still bore its look of great kindness, but her forehead seemed heavy and full of dark thoughts.

She intended to leave her husband in the Pyrenees until he had recovered, but for that money was necessary, and she had returned to earn it.

You would have said that it was she who wanted to borrow the sewing-machine. She put her feet together and pressed her elbows into her side, as if she feared that she was taking up too much room, and there was great timidity in her voice when she said to me, "You can come and sit in the workroom, if you like. I'll work with you while waiting for orders from my customers."

On the following morning we started. Mme. Dalignac had no idea of the work of making cheap goods, and her astonishment was great when she saw me sewing a small dress entirely with the machine, without basting and without preparation of any sort; but her astonishment almost turned into fright when she saw that my day's earnings did not exceed two francs.

It was no surprise to me. On my arrival in Paris I had to earn my living at all costs, and I had to accept

any kind of needlework that offered. It was by making clothes for the large shops that I had become a skillful machinist, but, whether the clothes were men's, women's or children's, my earnings had always been the same.

I explained these things to Mme. Dalignac. I told her how certain mistresses earned large profits by having made on homework hundreds and hundreds of garments. I pointed out to her the firms in the Rue du Sentier where you took your models, and whence you brought away material by the truckful if your model was a success.

She listened to me attentively, and this new kind of work soon seemed to her to be a job at which her husband might employ himself without overmuch fatigue. She reflected after each detail, which she made me explain precisely, and when she found out that the wholesale firms paid on a fixed date, and that she would not be obliged to send in her invoices an indefinite number of times, she decided to make a few pretty models, which she carried immediately to the Rue du Sentier.

She came back a little saddened by the prices which had been offered to her. However, she brought back twelve orders from the firm of Quibu, which she cut out immediately. And, at the end of the day, we knew that our earnings would be doubled.

This brought us great courage and gayety. Mme. Dalignac laughed with her fresh laughter, and I seemed to hear the *patron* when he said, "She laughs pretty, does my wife."

The firm of Quibu was one of the most important

in the Sentier. Its second order, therefore, was so big that it was necessary to recall the old workgirls and to take on new.

Bouledogue was not pleased with this change. She feared for the delicacy of her hands, but when she understood that piecework would enable her to earn more if she worked harder, she stopped growling, and spoke no more of going away to some other mistress.

Bergeounette, who knew all the different kinds of needlework, gave advice. According to her, outworkers often caused trouble, while work in the shop was regular and easy to superintend. Only machines were needed. She happened to know a Jew dealer who sold them on credit, and she offered to bring him along.

This dealer was a young man who looked old. He glanced at Mme. Dalignac, then sat down, and begged her to state clearly what she wanted.

And while each one of us held her peace, we heard, "I want three sewing-machines."

"Yes, madam."

"All new."

"Yes, madam."

"I want time in which to pay for them."

"Yes, madam."

The dealer's voice was full of deference, and he shut his eyes and bowed slightly at each reply.

Mme. Dalignac neither inquired the price of the machines nor the conditions of payment. She only said, when the Jew got up to depart, "I shall perhaps not pay regularly, but I shall certainly pay."

The dealer raised both his hands, smiling to show his entire confidence, and before going out, he bowed so low that a lock of his hair fell forward and swung like a tassel.

The machines were delivered the same day, and soon there were a dozen girls in the workshop.

Mme. Dalignac's powers were no longer sufficient for the cutting out. I helped her, and we often remained very late preparing for the morrow's work. We also had to set up the prices to be paid for each model. This was a great difficulty. I was no good at figures, any more than Mme. Dalignac, and we got so mixed up with our calculations that we laughed long and loud at our clumsiness. Mme. Dalignac sometimes became discouraged, and said, "Ah! if my husband were here!" Finally, after a considerable number of attempts, the prices were fixed, and the book of references became clear and easy to consult.

Mme. Doublé arrived, as her habit was, towards the end of September. She became red on entering, and her black eyes were brilliant with anger. She had just met Duretour below, who had told her impolitely that we should no longer be making fashionable dresses.

At sight of her, a little bar furrowed Mme. Dalignac's forehead above her eyebrows. However, she made her welcome, and spoke to her with her usual mildness. There was a trembling in Mme. Doublé's voice, and her eyes shifted as if she were pursuing something that tried to escape them.

She made a sudden step which brought her much too

near her sister-in-law, and her trembling voice asked, "Eh bé! And what about me?"

Mme. Dalignac retreated a little. Her face took on that air of suffering it had always when she yielded to others, and she replied, "I'll try to make you some models."

And when Mme. Doublé had departed, she remained a long time leaning on the table while her hand traced lines and squares mechanically with the French chalk.

The *patron* knew nothing of the transformation of the workshop. His wife intended to inform him of it later, in order not to disturb his repose; but, a few days after Mme. Doublé's visit, he turned up without warning.

He had no strength, and could hardly stand up. And, as Mme. Dalignac was overwrought with anxiety, he showed her a letter from his sister. It was not long before his confidence returned. He quickly understood the new organization, and he himself put away his embroidering machine at the end of the shop.

The work went on well, but the old-time intimacy no longer existed. Each moment there were disputes or noisy laughter, which the *patron* could not stop. And most of the new girls made it clearly understood that they would not come back on the following day if they were troubled with remonstrances. Some of them did not scruple to make fun of the *patron's* accent. As he said *crante* instead of *quarante* (forty), they often confused it with *trente* (thirty), and this caused errors in the measurements. Therefore, you suddenly heard

a bold voice asking, "*Patron,* how many centimeters to the shoulders of the blue dress?"

"Crante," replied the *patron.*

And the bold voice went on, "Does it take a three or a four, your figure?"

He dared not be angry, but he said to his wife, "They're a little too free."

At the time of the deliveries we were all taken with a kind of insanity. The *patron* hastily verified the labels, and passed the garments to Duretour, who did them up in parcels.

It happened that one of the *Samaritaine's* labels was sewn to a mantle for the *Printemps.* Then there were deafening recriminations and protestations. Nobody acknowledged the mistake, and Duretour, who liked threading needles less and less, was obliged to put the mistake right.

It happened also that a button came off merely by shaking the garment. The *patron* then tried to dominate the noise by shouting half annoyed, "At least, ladies, sew them on so that they hold from here to the shop."

These hours of noisy activity pleased him. Amid the general bustle he seemed to recover his strength. But the moment Duretour left in a cab overflowing with parcels, he fell back into his easy chair and stirred no more.

The wool dust made Mme. Dalignac anxious for him. She would have liked him to return to the Pyrenees, but he refused to listen.

"I don't want to leave you," he said.

To M. Bon, who gave him the same advice, he replied with an obstinate air, "No, I tell you." And with his eyes he continued to follow his wife, whose enormous shears grated and cut without respite into the thickness of the materials.

Among the new workgirls, there was Gabielle. She pronounced her name in this way, and nobody thought of calling her Gabrielle. She was a fine large woman, who laughed at everything and who drove her machine at a high speed. She had a thick skin and a large nose, but her teeth were so white and her lips so fresh, that you quickly forgot the rest of her face. She kept her arms bare to the elbows, and her blouse was always open at the neck.

She came from the Ardennes, and was not much more than eighteen years of age. She had just left her parents, as the result of a scene with them which made her laugh until the tears came every time she spoke about it.

They wanted to marry her to a neighbor whom she did not like, and, by taking her on one side, each had tried to persuade her. But one Sunday her father and her mother began to talk to her together. Her mother praised the qualities of the groom, and predicted a happiness exactly similar to hers since her marriage. And as Gabielle continued obstinately to reply that she did not love the neighbor, her father said to her with a kiss, "That doesn't matter, little girl. Look at me. I married your mother because she was steady and had a little money, but I didn't love her." Whereupon

Gabielle saw her mother rear up to her father, and shout, "Ha! You didn't love me?"

And she had seen her turn in the same breath to take up a broomstick. "Ha! You didn't love me. . . . You wicked man." And at the memory of her father taking flight, Gabielle laughed, opening her mouth so wide that you could see the bottom of her throat like a pink flower.

She, too, loved dancing. Hearing some talk of a ball where Bouledogue was promising herself to dance a whole afternoon, she became restless to such an extent that she could not remain in her place. In her part of the country, she went to a dance every Sunday, and her parents had never said a word against it. Her mother even accompanied her from time to time, simply for the pleasure of seeing her jumping about. Bouledogue saw no harm in it either, and she offered no objections to taking her to the Bal Bullier on the following Sunday.

Unlike Bouledogue, who never stayed away from the workshop, even when she had danced all night, Gabielle did not come to work on the following day. She became a little confused in her explanations, and the look Bouledogue gave her made her blush and work her machine at full speed.

We learned that at this dance everything had gone well at first. While the two cousins went round together in high spirits, Gabielle, laughing and wholly given to the joy of the occasion, passed fearlessly from one dancer to another. But at the hour of leaving, she

had plainly refused to follow Bouledogue, saying that she could get home alone quite well.

My old neighbor had also become my workshop companion. Her age and her weakness had moved Mme. Dalignac to such pity that she had undertaken to employ her from year's end to year's end, without giving a thought to the work she might be able to do or to the hours she would miss. Her arrival had brought with it a certain amount of discontent among the others, and we had to install her in the cutting-room, where she added to the general encumberment.

The *patron* did not look on the poor old woman with a favorable eye any more than the workers. And Duretour, who ordinarily troubled herself about nobody, said to me, with a grimace, "That's a fine idea to bring here a woman of the back ages."

However, it was not long before Mlle. Herminie had won the sympathy of everybody. Her abrupt frankness and the tone of equality which she used to all soon pleased the *patron,* and attracted the attention of the others, who brought her back into the workshop like a young comrade. Her unexpected comparisons and her stories full of exaggeration astonished and amused.

Her voice was so familiar to me that, for the most part, I paid no attention to what she was saying. But when I saw the *patron* come up to listen, I too lent my ear.

One day I heard, "When we got to the vine, the lads offered their hands to the girls to help them get down from the cart, but, as I never did anything like

the others, I refused a hand, and . . . fr-r-out. . . . I jumped, like a swallow. My pink dress caught in the footstep, and bang . . . I fell on my face, and remained as though dead. They picked me up with my face split from the eye to the chin, and two soldiers who were passing by took me home to my parents."

The *patron* laughed and looked for the scar on the face, but it only existed in Mlle. Herminie's imagination.

We spent Sundays together in my room, as in the past days of the holidays. The staircase was still full of the smells of cooking, but the smell of our own meals mingled therewith, and we no longer tried to guess the names of the dishes nor the quality of the wines that others drank. Mlle. Herminie now ate the whole of her cutlet, and, when she had sipped her cup of hot coffee, she no longer worried about the future.

At the same time as Gabielle, we had acquired Mme. Félicité Damoure. Her two names seemed so funny to the *patron* that he would not separate them.[1]

She was a little, dark, withered woman, and although she was still very young her voice was like an old woman's. When there was a dispute, she shouted louder than anybody, and always said ridiculous things.

On the day of her arrival, the *patron* had said to us, "She's from the south, but not my part."

[1] The point is in the pronunciation. Félicité Damoure is pronounced in the same way as Félicité d'Amour ("felicity of love").

Her curious phraseology made us laugh. She said, "I've lost myself the thimble. Yet, I had put it in my pocket."

But what drew upon her especially the mockery of the others, was her immoderate confidence in herb-tea. She consumed an extraordinary number of plants which she called her little herbs. To believe her, since she had married her husband three years before, she had saved him from death more than twenty times by making him drink herb-tea at all his meals.

"Is he often ill?" asked Mme. Dalignac.

To our astonishment, Félicité Damoure replied calmly through her nose, "Oh, no! He's a strong man, who's never yet been ill."

Her entry of a morning never passed unnoticed. Instead of the ordinary and discreet Good-morning of everybody else, she let her faded voice drag out with, "Eh! adieu, ladies!"

Sometimes Bergeounette imitated her in a shrill, disconsolate voice, "Eh! adieu, ladies!"

Gabielle burst out laughing, and the *patron,* whom it amused, said, shrugging a shoulder, "Lord! how stupid Bergeounette is!"

In December, the dead-season returned, but a repetition of the models gave enough work to keep the old girls occupied. Moreover, every time the cold increased, urgent orders would reach us. Duretour then hastily went and found the new-comers, and the new machines became noisy again.

Some days before Christmas, a hard frost brought us

a series of mantles which it was absolutely necessary to deliver immediately. But Duretour went on her search in vain; she only returned with Gabielle and Félicité Damoure. The others were occupied elsewhere, or would not allow themselves to be disturbed. A great anxiety filled us all. The mantles were sold in advance. The labels which Duretour had brought back were proof of that. And if the firm of Quibu could not deliver them in time, there would be unpleasantness for it and for us.

Even Bouledogue understood this, and everybody decided to work overtime to finish as quickly as possible.

On the first two evenings all went well, but on the third, after the day's work, every one showed discontent at being obliged to come back and spend the night of Christmas Eve in the workshop. The *patron* promised oranges and hot wine, but his wife did not hide her fears for this last evening.

However, towards nine o'clock the girls came up one after the other. Duretour could not manage to put a scowl on her pretty face, in spite of her annoyance at not spending Christmas Eve with her sweetheart's family.

Roberte and Félicité Damoure arrived together doubled up with the cold. Then came Gabielle, her hands in the pockets of her jacket, and breathing as though she were too hot. Bouledogue entered with her nose wrinkled up and her teeth showing. And last of all as ever, Bergeounette rushed in with her turbulence and her flitter-brained air.

When Mme. Dalignac had pushed the lamps backwards or forwards to the satisfaction of all, the work went on in silence. The rumbling of carts came up from the avenue, and the trams grated on their rails. Troops of young people came down from Montrouge singing at the top of their voices. And during the minutes of calm, you could hear the starting of a cab, one of the wheels of which rasped the curb of the pavement, while the laughter of women mingled with the sharp cracked sound of the horses' hoofs.

As the evening advanced, we paid more attention to the noises from outside. From time to time, one of us allowed a heavy sigh to escape from her, and it was impossible to say whether the sigh was full of regret for the festival outside or whether it was caused by the fatigue of overwork.

A little before midnight, Bergeounette began to sing a kind of slow chant, as sad as a lamentation. Immediately, Duretour began to make fun of it.

"That's a gay song for Christmas Eve," she said.

"It's an old carol my mother sang when I was little," replied Bergeounette. She added, moving her whole body about as was her custom, "It's the story of Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem." And forthwith she began —

"Allons, chère Marîe,
Devers cet horloger.
C'est une hôtellerie,
Nous y pourrons loger."[1]

[1] "Come, dear Mary, to that clockmaker's. It is a hostelry, and we can lodge there."

And Bergeounette's voice suddenly became very gentle, as Mary's must have been, replying —

"La maison est bien grande,
Et semble ouverte à tous.
Néanmoins j'appréhende
Qu'elle ne le soit pour nous.[1]

Gabielle perceived that she was losing time listening to the carol. She made her machine roar, and Joseph's words, asking asylum for his wife, were almost muffled by the noise. However, you could hear an irritated voice saying —

"Les gens de votre sorte,
Ne logent pas céans.
Frappez à l'autre porte,
C'est pour les pauvres gens." [2]

Through the noise of the machine, we followed Joseph and Mary going from door to door, and receiving nothing but refusals and often insults.

The master of the Grand Dauphin had "neither bed nor cover," and M. La Rose-Rouge offered Mary a corner on the straw with the grooms. Finally, a woman took pity on Mary; she said with surprise —

"Vous paraissez enceinte
Et prête d'accoucher." [3]

[1] "The house is very large, and seems open to all. Nevertheless, I fear that it is not so for us."

[2] "People of your sort do not lodge here. Knock at the other door; that is for poor people."

[3] "You seem to be with child and about to give it birth."

And Mary, tired and resigned, replied —

"Je n'attends plus que l'heure,
Non plus que le moment.
Et ainsi je demeure
A la merci des gens." [1]

But from the end of a passage, a man called for the "chatterer," who was lingering at the door, and the woman went back into the house regretfully, saying —

"C'est mon mari qui crie,
Il faut nous séparer." [2]

The sewing-machine had stopped. All the girls were silent, and for one long moment, you could hear nothing but the noise of the thimbles against the needles, and the soft, warm rubbing of fur against material.

Bergeounette's dark face had lost a little of its hardness, when she said in the silence: "Now Joseph and Mary are going towards the stable."

The sewing-machine began once more to roar. The beating of its treadle made you think of a dog barking furiously at poor people passing too close to a well-guarded house. The barking diminished, to begin again the moment afterwards, and Bergeounette looked constantly towards the window, as if she hoped to see Joseph and Mary passing.

Outside, the rolling of carts was becoming less and less. On the avenue, there was now the tramp of groups

[1] "I await but the hour, I await but the moment. And thus I remain at the mercy of people."

[2] "It is my husband calling. We must separate."

returning from midnight mass. And suddenly two discordant voices rang out singing —

"He is born, the Divine Child."

Gabielle began to laugh. Every face took on an air of content, as at the announcement of a great joy, and soon the workshop was full of chatter and song.

Nearly every one had a carol somewhere at the bottom of her memory. The great voice of Bouledogue sang a childish air which she had learned at school, and nobody made fun of the one Roberte intoned in an altogether ridiculous manner.

Mme. Dalignac's gentle voice also rose, and I myself remembered a carol in which the shepherds of Sologne left their flock, to take presents to the Divine Child —

"Sylvain lui porte un agnelet,
Son petit-fils, un pot de lait
Et deux moineaux dans une cage.
Robin lui porte du gâteau,
Pierrot lui porte du fromage
Et le gros Jean, un petit veau." [1]

Night was very advanced when the garments were finished, but nobody made remark of it. The stools were put away in good humor, and the descent of the stairs was full of laughter.

A sharp cold surprised us below. The moon, high and brilliant, brightened the avenue, as if somebody

[1] "Sylvain takes him a lambkin, his grandson a jug of milk and two sparrows in a cage. Robin takes him some cake, Pierrot takes him some cheese, and fat John a little calf."

had lit it expressly for this night of festival. And to finish the night, Duretour carried us away into a joyous round, singing in her falsetto voice the last words of my carol —

"Et nos troupeaux, laissons-les-là.
Et nos troupeaux, laissons-les-là." [1]

[1] "And our flocks, let us leave them behind."

XII

Since the day when Clément had entered my little room, my old neighbor seemed to have forgotten the vines of her country, and only to remember her unhappy love-affair. She spoke of it as of a recent happening, and when I chanced to look up at her, I was always astonished to find her old.

She remembered absolutely nothing of her childhood. All her troubles and all her joys dated from the age of eighteen, as if life had really not begun for her except at that age.

It was at that moment that love had entered her heart. It had penetrated so deeply that nothing had been able to drive it away, and I perceived it like a mysterious fire that ceaselessly warmed her, and prevented her lips from withering.

At the beginning of her confidences, she had put a touch of bitterness into her accent, saying, "He saw us so prettily dressed, my sister and me, that he imagined we were rich; but when he learned that our parents would not give us as much as one gold piece on our marriage, he turned away from me to marry another."

Her state of exaltation increased with the idea that I might one day become Clément's wife. At the workshop she was on the watch for everything that Mme.

Dalignac might say about her nephew. And in the evening she did not always wait until we arrived home to repeat to me that she desired this marriage with all her heart. She made projects for the future on this basis, and if I happened to laugh at them, she got annoyed. Then she appeared to forget that it was my future and not hers, and soon she spoke of the marriage as of a happiness that was due to her.

On this Christmas Day our house resembled an open cage. The children escaped from it with joyous cries, and the calls of the parents were lost in the continual clatter of feet on the stairs.

For everybody it was a fine holiday, but for Mlle. Herminie it was in especial a day of fine memories.

The Christmas Day on which she had seen her sweetheart in his parents' house was just like this one, and, just as to-day, the children were joyously beating drums and blowing lustily on tin trumpets. Our carefully prepared meal left her almost indifferent, she had so many things to say.

I listened to her talking. A sort of youth put red into her cheeks and her wrinkles seemed less deep. Yet, when she had described at length the joy of that far-off day, she brought my thoughts back to Clément.

We knew from Mme. Dalignac that he was coming home on leave during the holidays, and that he would take advantage of this leisure to speak of a very serious thing that would influence his whole life.

The *patron* had laughed at Clément's letter.

"Té!" he said. "It's obvious that he is going to inform you that he is in love with a beautiful young woman, and that he wants to get married."

Mme. Dalignac had not replied, but a fixed look came into her eyes, as if she were seeking in the distance the beautiful young woman whom her nephew had chosen.

Was it I, as he had assured me at the time of his visit, and as Mlle. Herminie so ardently desired? A doubt came to me. I had not seen Clément again, although he had been home on leave several times since that day. And if, in his letters to Mme. Dalignac, he spoke of the workgirls, my name did not appear any oftener than those of Duretour and Bergeounette. This gave me neither pain nor pleasure. Nothing repelled me from Clément, but nothing attracted me to him either, and, if he had not been Mme. Dalignac's nephew, I should have soon forgotten him.

Now that we had drawn our chairs up to the stove, Mlle. Herminie spoke once more of her love. Her memories escaped one by one, and made me think of pretty birds flying round the room. She herself took on at times a wonderful form in my thoughts, so many were the shades of meaning she put into the sound of her voice, and so far from the present did she seem. She did not perceive that the cold entered whistling beneath the door, and that it sought to bite our legs. She did not hear the growing anger of the wind, which charioted a hard snow, and thrust it in squalls against the window-pane. And she did not see the darkness rise around us, and come spreading slowly over us.

She only looked at the little round stove which reddened on top. And when the cover had become like a ball of fire, and you could see only it and its luster on the ceiling, Mlle. Herminie stopped speaking and went to sleep.

I got up noiselessly and went to the window. On the brightly lit boulevard there were groups of people hurrying along, laughing and speaking loudly. Their shadows mingled, trailing at their feet, and their umbrellas covered with snow seemed like enormous flowers, swaying in a heavy wind. Above the roofs, night was not yet complete, but the sky was so low, that I imagined I could touch it only by stretching out my hand a little. And far away in the distance, above the houses, a factory chimney flung out a thick smoke which the wind beat down, and lengthened out towards me, heavy and black like a threat.

A call from Mlle. Herminie brought me back to the stove.

"Don't let the fire go out," she said.

I lit the lamp first of all, and I perceived the old woman quite dwindled and as though shriveled up in her chair. The red of her cheeks had gone, and her wrinkles were deeply hollowed at each corner of her mouth.

She was silent for some long time: then, when she had pulled her skirts more closely round her legs, she spoke again. But the memory containing the cheerful remembrances had shut, and the one which opened now contained only complaints and regrets.

I stirred up the fire, but in vain did the stove redden its cover once more; Mlle. Herminie remained serious and full of melancholy.

Our holidays were only to last a week; therefore, in spite of the bad weather, I dragged my old neighbor out each day for a walk. She did not pay much attention to the things of the street. She leaned on my arm, and continued to speak of her youth, and when she found nothing more to say about herself, she told of the joys and pains of others. In our quarter there was only the Boulevard Saint Michel that made her attentive. She loved its noisy and crowded pavements, where you met young couples embracing as they walked along.

Apart from this boulevard I took her to the Luxembourg mostly. On these winter days, the garden seemed to have become our property. Passersby crossed it in one direction or another, but nobody stopped in it. There was no question of our stopping in it either. The wind that blew on the terrace made Mlle. Herminie lower her head, and cut off her finest stories in the middle. We walked with no plan, and oftenest we did not go beyond the nursery, where the walks were most sheltered. At the side was the large wood, a wood in which the trees all kept the same distance, and where the grass never grew between the stones. Everything was of a dark color there; the benches mingled with the earth and the branches, and the *guignol* booth had the air of an abandoned hut. Far away in the fog-filled

walks, gray forms passed each other, crossed and disappeared.

In the nursery the trees were no less black, and on the lawns there remained only a semblance of verdure, but the box-trees and the spindle-trees retained all the thickness of their summer foliage.

As soon as we entered, the sparrows recognized us. They came up to us in groups, and even alighted on us to take the bread we had brought. The blackbirds remained on one side, and fled timidly at our approach, but the pigeons demanded their share insistently, and followed us like beggars. Like the benches of the garden, the birds blended with the earth. Their beautiful brilliant colors, their fine smooth plumage had disappeared. The pigeons especially seemed clothed with tattered wool. They had lost their vivacity also, and hopped chillily around us. On our departure, they flew clumsily to shelter themselves in a corner of the branches. Some of them perched on the tops of the trees, and in the falling evening they looked like old nests that the winter wind had not been able to dislodge.

Only the iron chairs scattered here and there had mingled with nothing. They all resembled each other in rust and wear; but each remained distinct like a living being.

A few of them which had fallen across the path seemed to be squatting like watch-dogs, while others which were lying flat on their backs seemed disposed for a long sleep.

In the middle of a group drawn up in a circle, one of

them sprawled in equilibrium on its fellow, and swayed by the wind made shrill cries to which the others seemed to listen in silence.

Two lying face to face in the shelter of a clump of bushes had the appearance of whispering to one another, while a third, half-hidden by a bench, leaned over them as if to surprise their secret.

There were some whose attitude it was so painful to see, that we could not help putting them straight.

Many were solitary, and, as we passed by, they took us by surprise like mysterious beings. Hidden against a tree, they seemed to lean on it with their shoulder only, and they raised one foot.

New Year's Day was the last day of our holiday, but the cold became so great and the sky so laden with clouds that Mlle. Herminie refused to go out. She brought from her room an old, dilapidated armchair, which she had much trouble in setting up straight. Then, when she had buried herself in it to such an extent that she could not get out without help, she said very decidedly, "Now, I'm waiting for my New Year's gifts."

Her New Year's gifts!

Our laughter at this sally was prolonged, for she had no one from whom to expect New Year's gifts any more than I had.

To turn aside the evil chance of the new year, I had bought in the morning a small bouquet of violets, which we had shared with the most meticulous care. A violet which had fallen from the bunch on to the floor during

the division had even been the subject of a long discussion. I had wanted to add it to Mlle. Herminie's share, assuring her that it represented another year's life to her, but she had refused it, saying that the fallen flower was the share of destiny. And, without losing a minute, she had made for it a tiny vase of paper, and had placed it in the msot conspicuous part of the fireplace.

In spite of the cold, our house was no less noisy than on Christmas Day. The rabbit-drums, the bleating sheep and the popguns made the same uproar on the staircase. Therefore, when I heard a knocking at my door, I did not stir, thinking that a child had knocked against it by mistake, but the knocks became stronger, and I got up to open.

It was Mme. Dalignac, a little out of breath from having climbed the stairs too rapidly.

Before entering even she asked me very quickly, "Is it true that you are willing to marry Clément?"

I stood dumbfounded, and I felt that I was blushing violently.

She did not wait a moment, and went on, lowering towards me her forehead, which was much above mine.

"Tell me. Is it really true?"

All her affection, all her desire for the happiness of her nephew were so evident in the trembling of her voice, that I nodded Yes without taking my eyes from hers.

She gave way to her pretty laughter as the *patron*

arrived, and said to him, "You see! Clément hasn't lied."

The *patron's* first smile had been for his wife, but in the one he addressed to me afterwards, there was a real content. Clément also entered with a pleased face. He strutted about a little in his handsome soldier's uniform, but his movements were measured, and his eyes rested on me very calmly.

Mme. Dalignac explained, as she made her husband sit down.

"It was only this morning," she said, "that Clément told us about you." She added as if to excuse herself for having come, "It was much too serious; I couldn't wait for your reply until to-morrow."

Clément did not remain very long without saying anything. In fact, after a while, he was almost the sole person who spoke. He explained slowly and clearly how he intended to set himself up and the work he would do, and, from the way he spoke of our future household, I understood that he had given lengthy reflection to it.

I followed all he said without losing a word. From time to time my eyes met his, but the confidence in himself which I met in them each time compelled me to seek Mme. Dalignac's, who remained somewhat beseeching and full of hope.

The day suddenly lowered, and the snow began to fall. It whirled around soft and light like fine down, and Mlle. Herminie pointed to it, and said, as she usually did, "The angels are shaking their wings."

Clément did not waste much time looking at the snow. The upholsterer's shop, with its brilliant appointments and its many customers, of which he already saw himself the master, absorbed all his attention. He told me that our marriage would take place as soon as he returned from his regiment, and his eyes softened altogether when he said to me, as he rose, "You will be very useful to me in my trade, and I am certain that you will regret nothing."

He was about to begin another phrase, but the *patron* prevented him by laughing, "Eh! You never know. . . . Don't start singing so quickly . . . then."

Clément laughed with us, and Mme. Dalignac, who had risen at the same time as he, stretched out her hand and said to me, "Believe me, he's a very good boy."

She laughed softly. And all the joy that was in her seemed to overflow about her.

Before leaving, Clément threw a rapid glance round on everything, as if he were making an inventory. Then he shifted the two bouquets I had bought in the morning, which he evidently thought were too near together, and after having smelt the little solitary violet he took it, and placed it without more ado in the buttonhole of his tunic. He went out behind the *patron* and his wife, and, as on the day when he had come alone, I remained a long while leaning over the bannisters.

I found Mlle. Herminie with her forehead glued to the window pane. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were clasped beneath her chin. I remained silent by

her side. Before us the roofs were beginning to hold the snow. The faded earthenware of the chimneys was ranged in lines, and they seemed to press one against the other to protect themselves from the cold. Among them, the long galvanized-iron chimneys thrust themselves up with their cowls, and turned towards us obstinately the entry to their black gulfs.

Mlle. Herminie returned to her armchair and I to the little bench near her; yet the rest of the evening found us often in disagreement. At bedtime, the poor old woman said to me sadly, "My New Year's gifts are very nice, but I don't know whether to rejoice at them or to weep."

That night, I dreamed that Clément had made me climb into the seat of a little cart, in which there was only room for one. I was so squeezed up between him and the side-rack that I could hardly breathe. Clément feared nothing. He held the reins with a light hand, and let the horse go boldly along a road covered with cut wood. The cart remained upright and the beast, held well in hand, did not stumble, but just at the bend of a little bridge, the road suddenly became a blind turning, and before Clément could stop his horse, it fell heavily, and the cart was upset. Twice in succession I had this dream, and the second time I felt my limbs touch the earth so roughly that I was afraid to go to sleep again. I sat up to escape from sleep, and I tried to recognize the noises outside. The sounds had changed. The voices of belated passersby came to me without the clatter of their footsteps, and I divined the

passing of the cabs without hearing their rolling. Then the church of Notre-Dame-des-Champs struck once, and it seemed very near to me and at the same time very far from me as if the bell had been wrapped round with cloth. Then, to put an end to the anguish which was beginning to oppress me, I jumped out of bed, and ran to the window.

It was the snow that was stifling the sound. You could not see it fall, but it spread thick and white beneath the lights. And quite near at hand, on the pavement opposite, a gas-lamp made the flakes floating all about it seem like large white moths.

I returned to my bed. And for a long time, in the silence of the night, I followed the flight of the angels who were shaking their wings over Paris.

In the morning, when Mlle. Herminie awakened me, an icy wind blew over the town. The weather had cleared up, and thousands of little white clouds fled through the heavens, flying very high.

Below, a long line of men were attacking the snow vigorously with brooms, and all together they were pushing it towards the drains, like some unclean thing.

XIII

The winter had gone, and the sun shone once more into the workshop. But although the spring made the air milder and loaded the chestnut trees in the avenue with blossom, it seemed to carry away day by day all the freshness and all the gayety of Gabielle. She herself understood nothing of the languidness which made her work so toilsome to her and took from her all desire to laugh. Her rosy lips were colorless, and the shadow encircling her eyes made her cheeks seem still paler.

Every one of her companions said that she knew a remedy that would cure her gradual fading, and she did not lack advice.

"Drink sage and the lesser centaury," shouted Félicité Damoure to her.

And she then went on adding so many herbs to those she had named that the *patron* amused himself by making her repeat them one after the other, on the pretext that he wanted to remember their names. Bergeounette advised noise and movement before all. And Duretour, who did not like potions, was certain that only a sweetheart could bring back the good health that Gabielle had lost.

"Paris doesn't do you any good," said Mme. Dalig-

nac to her as her contribution. And she urged her to return to her village.

The *patron* scolded, "If she goes away, you'll lose your best machinist."

Gabielle acknowledged that Paris did not do her any good. Moreover, she confessed that she was afraid of it, but she was determined to remain another year in it. She intended to work hard, in order to get together a little money, which would prove to her parents that she was able to live without their help, and reasonable enough to marry some one of her own choice. However, as her health did not improve, Mme. Dalignac became anxious about her drawn features, and obliged her to consult M. Bon on the day he visited the *patron*. As she left her machine to come up to him, M. Bon looked her up and down. He asked her no questions, but skillfully undid the buttons that scarcely held her blouse together, and he touched one after the other bosoms that you could guess were very full and that stood very high beneath the chemise.

He smiled as he buttoned up the blouse once more. Then he looked Gabielle full in the face, and said, "It's not such a great hurt when a fine girl like you brings a child into the world."

He inquired her age, and sent her off with a friendly word, "Off you go, young beauty."

And as Mme. Dalignac was waiting, with her shears in the air, he added a little lower, turning towards us, "She's five months gone with child."

Gabielle had immediately taken up her work again. But as soon as M. Bon had gone, she rose and asked Mme. Dalignac, "What did he say was the matter with me?"

All the machines stopped as if they, too, were waiting for the reply.

Mme. Dalignac hesitated, then she reddened as she replied, "He says that you will soon have your child."

Gabielle frowned, and stretched out an ear, as people do who think they have misheard.

"My child!" she said. . . . "What child?"

"Why, the one you are carrying. . . . You must know quite well that you're with child."

No, Gabielle did not know, and everybody was aware of this by the expression of fear that spread over her already colorless features. She passed her hands over her waist several times, and sat down suddenly. Then her face colored, and she stood up, saying a little angrily, "It's only wicked girls who get children, and I'm not one."

Bergeounette retaliated as if she had been insulted.

"Never mind about wickedness," she said. "Your condition merely proves you've got a lover."

Gabielle's eyes rested a moment on her, then her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but it was laughter that came from them. It came in peals, as we had always known it, and almost immediately words followed. They were words laden with laughter and defiance.

No, she hadn't any lover. She wasn't so silly. She

knew too well that a girl who had a lover might have a child, and that a girl who has a child is a wicked creature whom everybody points at.

Her lover she would choose to her own taste, and marry him like her mother, and have one or two children, not more, because you must first of all give them good health, and then give them the time to learn a good trade, so that in turn they may continue to live honestly."

Her hearty laugh burst out again more loudly, and the words came again mingled with sneers.

Lovers could come hanging round her if they liked; they would lose their time. She had no desire to be like Marie Minard who lived in a wretched hut in an out-of-the-way corner of the country, and whose child had become crippled for want of care. She, too, had been a sempstress once, but when her condition was known, her *patronne* had driven her out of the workshop. And since that time it was only out of pure charity that the people of the countryside employed her at the hardest work.

Gabielle's laughter was still pealing loudly, as she turned on her heels to show off the slenderness of her waist.

She appeared to be so sure of herself, and her body had retained so perfect a shape that everybody was forced to believe that M. Bon had made a mistake. And as the machines started again, Bergeounette sang in an ironical voice the song of the *Earthly Paradise* —

"Dans ce jardin tout plein de fleurs
Et de douceur,
Le serpent rencontra la belle,
Et lui parla."[1]

Some days elapsed, and as Gabielle no longer complained her companions troubled no more about her. But it was not so with the *patron*. He followed her about insistently with his eyes, and one evening, just as she was going out, he stopped her.

"Eh! I say," he cried. "Your belt will burst very soon."

He added mischievously, before Gabielle could find a single word of reply, "It can be seen now."

It was true. Gabielle's waist had become so swollen that it dragged at her skirt, and pulled the material round to the front.

Bergeounette, who was at the door ready to go out, returned quickly. She wore her belligerent air, and seemed ready to defend some one, but at the first look from Gabielle, she merely said at us, "She owes no explanation to anybody."

Gabielle was leaning against the cutting table, hiding her face in her arm, like an urchin who fears to be struck.

"Don't be ashamed, now," said Bergeounette. "Every girl has a lover." And very gently she uncovered her face.

[1] "In that garden, full of flowers and sweetness, the serpent met the fair one and spoke to her."

Then Gabielle said, heart-brokenly, "I can quite see that I'm going to have a child, but I don't know how it can be, since I haven't a lover."

"Has he left you?" asked Mme. Dalignac.

"No."

"Is he dead?" asked Bergeounette in turn.

"No," replied Gabielle again. Before our silence, she went on, "Nobody will believe me, and yet I say in all truth: I've never had a lover."

Bergeounette at that burst out laughing.

"What!" she said. "You did the miracle all by yourself?"

"I don't know," said Gabielle. And she looked at us, as if she expected enlightenment from us on her condition.

Bergeounette continued her jests while asking the most precise of questions. And still Gabielle replied, looking like a lost dog, "I don't know."

Then, as the *patron* began to poke fun at her too, she started to weep.

Mme. Dalignac's gentle face became full of pity.

"Stop tormenting her," she said. "You can see that she doesn't know anything." She added, passing her hand over Gabielle's smooth forehead: "The truth will come to light of itself."

The truth came out on the following day. Gabielle, who had taken the time to enlarge her waistband, arrived late, against her habit, and she had to disturb two of her companions to reach her place. Her swollen eyelids and her way of passing between the machines

as if she feared to knock against them told every one that M. Bon had not been mistaken. There were exclamations and laughter among the new-comers, and in the corner of the older girls, Bouledogue listened attentively to what Bergeounette was whispering to her.

At the end of the day, Bouledogue stayed behind to remind Gabielle of her absence for a whole day after the Sunday of the ball.

Gabielle had not forgotten it, for at the first words she became very red and said, "Yes, I'm certain my misfortune comes from that."

She told us what she had not dared to say before, so great had been her fear of derision.

She had no idea at all how she had left the ball. She only remembered that she had been very hot, and that she had had a drink with her last dancer. Then, on the following day, she had awakened after midday in a room which was not hers. For some time she had tried to understand, and, not succeeding, she had called, but nobody had come. Then in a great fright she had dressed herself hastily, and had fled from the house without looking behind her. Where was the house? What was the name of the street? Gabielle did not know, and she was well aware that she would never find either again.

Bouledogue's voice scolded, "Your behavior at the ball was scarcely that of a good girl, and I can say that it was shameful to see the way you hung on the necks of your dancers."

"I was enjoying myself so much," said Gabielle.

Her innocent air was so natural that a light laugh escaped from the *patron.*

On the other hand, Bouledogue scoffed at her cruelly, and her sarcasms covered poor Gabielle with so much confusion, that Bergeounette took up her defense and turned on Bouledogue.

"You who are so clever with your tongue," she said, "you go to the ball so often that one of these days the same thing will happen to you."

"No," said Bouledogue shortly. And she blew violently through her nose before adding, "I go to the ball to dance, and only that."

Work went on full swing, and Gabielle made her machine roar no less than in the past. She stopped once, however, a little suddenly to ask Bergeounette two questions.

"Then I shall have to be confined?"

"Certainly!"

"Just like a married woman?"

"Of course! Exactly like," replied Bergeounette in a jesting voice.

The machine started once more at a pace that took some time to recover its old self-assurance.

When she was in her eighth month, Gabielle began to revolt. The anger which she could not direct elsewhere fell wholly on the coming child.

"Look at the mess he's making of me," she said. And she flung her arms behind her to accentuate her

deformity. It soon became impossible to imagine that she had once been merry and lovable.

She was now a woman with a hard face and a disillusioned air who bore her pregnancy as a frightful and intolerable evil. During the day, in the deafening noise of the workshop, she seemed sometimes to forget her condition, but, in the evening, after the departure of the others, she gave vent to all her ill-will against the child.

"I don't want it. It's not mine," she repeated violently.

And a flood of imprecations and such violent threats against the innocent child flowed from her that the *patron* was offended, and spoke of making her hold her peace. His wife prevented him.

"Let her say her say," she said. "All her resentment will evaporate in words, and when her child is born she will love it."

In the hope of appeasing her, Bergeounette tried to turn her thoughts by speaking to her of her parents. But this was worse still, for regret came that increased Gabielle's anger.

Since the adventure of the ball, before she had known of its consequences, she had thought every day of her return to the Ardennes. How many times had she seen herself arriving at her parents' home, clad in a pretty dress earned and made by her own hands, and how she had felt her courage doubled thinking of all the affection that awaited her in her home! Now she knew that she would never return to her village. She

no longer held even the hope of seeing her parents once again; for she was certain that her mother would deny her.

"Even that fine lover I refused," she said, "would pick up stones by the handful to throw at me."

At the idea of such contempt for herself, Gabielle flew into a furious passion, or wept endlessly. Another torment still was added to her affliction.

In the street she could not bear the looks of the passersby, although Mme. Dalignac had made a mantle for her that covered her from head to heel. It was soon just the same in the workshop, where she drew upon herself the rebukes of her companions.

Mme. Dalignac exhorted everybody to patience, and asserted times without end that pregnancy had never disfigured any one. Sometimes even, with gentle gestures, she patted Gabielle, and with a pretty smile said, "As for me, I know nothing more beautiful than a pregnant woman."

The *patron* always backed up his wife with the same words, and to put a stop to Duretour's muted laughter, he called out to her loudly, "Isn't that true?"

And Duretour, her nose buried in her parcels, clamored like a school urchin, "Yes, sir."

XIV

JACQUES came back as he used to do to the cutting-room. Sandrine's old neighbor had given us a lengthy account of the poor boy's torment: his divorce, first of all, which his wife had easily obtained; and the illness which had carried off his mother at the same time. Then, when everything in Paris had failed him, he had gone to Sandrine's village, where were his two little ones and their grandmother, from whom he had heard nothing for months. But there again everything had failed him. Sandrine's mother had not been able to bear her heavy sorrow, and she, too, had been taken to the cemetery. And to make his misfortune complete, as his children did not bear the name of their father and they had no relatives left, they had been sent to the workhouse as deserted children. Now Jacques shut himself up each evening with his trouble in Sandrine's little room, where he had set up his home. His neighbor, who felt a great pity for him, had called us in to his aid.

"If nobody lends him a helping hand, he will die too," she said. And she added with a touch of fear, "There are nights when he weeps like a madman."

Jacques' first visit had scarcely lasted a quarter of an hour, and he had gone away again more upset than

when he arrived. However, he had come back at the end of a week, and his visits now became more regular. Sometimes still he passed by on the opposite pavement without daring to come up, but the *patron*, who liked him, was on the look-out for him, and made signs to him. This amused the *patron*.

"I'm like Bergeounette with her one-armed man," he said to us, laughing.

Jacques did not want signaling more than once, and soon afterwards his long body appeared in the doorway. As the days went by, he became more expansive, and soon he could speak of the past without the sudden extinction of his voice.

Mme. Dalignac imagined a thousand ways and means which would permit him to have his children with him, but none was possible. What was wanted before all was a wife for Jacques.

"Certainly," she said, "there's no lack of widowers who manage with two children. But Jacques—"

And her arm, which she had raised very high, remained as if in suspense. Her thoughts turned as a matter of course towards Gabielle, who was upright and brave. She believed that a marriage between her and Jacques was a reasonable thing, which would bring peace to them both and some happiness for the future.

She said to Jacques, "You'll have three children when you start housekeeping together; that's all."

Jacques took immediately to the idea of marrying Gabielle. He thought that she was more to be pitied

than he even, and everything that Mme. Dalignac said to him seemed just.

It was not so easy to speak to Gabielle, so great was her indifference to Jacques' person. He was no more to her than a sewing-machine or the cutting-table against which she leaned in her moments of despair, and she had never troubled herself about his presence when she gave play to her anger or let flow her tears.

Jacques confessed modestly, "I'm certain that she has never even looked at me."

To attract Gabielle's attention, he several times offered his arm to her in the street. She accepted, happy at having the appearance of a married woman in the eyes of passers; but, when she arrived at her door, she withdrew her arm, saying, "Thanks," in an absent-minded way, as if some one had lent her a stick to help her cross a difficult spot.

It was necessary, however, to decide to speak to Gabielle about the marriage. She replied neither Yes nor No. She merely showed excessive astonishment. But from that day she often looked at Jacques, and refused his arm in the street.

The month of June arrived with its flowers and its heat. The chestnut-trees in the avenue lifted their branches up to the workshop, and from morning to evening the sun entered by the open windows. In spite of this, the *patron's* strength was declining, and his thinness was increasing.

"He needs the air of the Pyrenees," said M. Bon

at each visit. Mme. Dalignac thought the same. But nothing and nobody could determine the sick man to leave Paris. Lying sideways in his easy chair, attentive to all the movements of his wife, he spent his time looking at her without ever tiring.

"At the very least," implored M. Bon, "don't remain here in the dust of the materials. Go and breathe outside."

And he mentioned the neighboring avenues and the garden of the Luxembourg, where you could walk and rest at your ease.

"Yes, yes," replied the *patron,* "I will go out to-morrow."

And on the morrow he remained as the day before with his eyes constantly on his wife, who, without ever tiring, lifted bodily the heavy rolls of material, and, laying them out on the table, cut several garments at once.

With the fine weather, the desire for the balcony opposite came back to him. He growled against those who had the luck to possess it and who did not use it. And, in fact, nobody ever did come out on the balcony, as Bouledogue had predicted. It was only used for beating carpets, and already large gray stains were appearing on its turned bars and on the whiteness of its stones.

To make the *patron* go out into the open air, Mme. Dalignac decided to send me with him every day to the Luxembourg. He was in a bad temper all the way, and no sooner had we arrived in the garden than he began to talk of returning. He did not believe in

his own recovery, and he blamed me for obeying his wife. Therefore, after having placed his chair near the gate, he affected to forget my presence, and unfolded his newspaper, which he held up between us. However, he read very little. He spent most of his time looking at the ladies, and when one of them showed some resemblance to Mme. Dalignac, he became amiable to me once more and pointed her out to me.

"I say, little Marie Claire," he said, "look at that one a bit. Doesn't she resemble her, eh? But all the same, she's not so well made."

It was true, nearly always, for it was difficult to be as well made as Mme. Dalignac.

After a week of growling and resistance, he began to take pleasure in the garden. The terrace, burning with heat, attracted him more than the shade and coolness of the trees, and when he came across a stone bench full in the sun, he spread himself out on it and touched it too with his hands, as if to take in all its warmth.

The nursery and the wood had much changed since Christmas. The pigeons in their new clothes now strutted about it in couples, and the sparrows, busy with their nests, forgot to quarrel among themselves, and flew towards every bit of down that floated by in the air.

Gabielle, who could no longer do a full day's work, sometimes came and joined us. She turned her back on the passersby, and held herself stiff and upright on the bench, as if she wished to hide her condition from the blackbirds running anxiously across the lawn.

Jacques also came and joined us. Unlike Gabielle, he sat on the bench like a hunchback, and did not even try to repress the nervous trembling that made him jerk his elbows away from his body and shook him all over.

To the right and left of us, young mothers, with calm faces, watched over their grown-up babies or rocked with their hand the little cart that served as a cradle for their new-born child.

Jacques avoided looking at the children and mothers, and Gabielle, with squared shoulders and closed eyes, wept and moaned quietly.

It had taken me less than a week to acquire a taste for the Luxembourg Gardens. I stayed there in a sort of enchantment, which made me forget the *patron* and his sulks.

I imagined that the garden was floating in space, and that its railings with their gilded spikes were there only to keep it within bounds.

High among the trees, the queens, all white on their pedestals, made me think of angels about to fly away. And in the distance, the towers of Saint-Sulpice, of which you could see the summit, seemed placed in the sky like wayside altars.

The noises of the town did not reach us, and the wind in the trees was as soft to the ears as the rustling of silk. All the while, the voice of Bergeounette sang to my memory the song of the *Earthly Paradise* —

"Dans un jardin délicieux
Tout près des cieux." [1]

Over beyond the paths, when a group of children clad in bright colors passed running, they seemed to me like clumps of flowers that had escaped from the flower-beds and were flying towards the underwoods.

On the benches and the chairs couples remained inert and silent, as though crushed by happiness. Other couples, very young, very serious, and their gaze fixed in front of them, went with hurrying feet towards the nursery.

The evening fell, and suddenly the sounding of a trumpet warned us that they were going to shut the gates. And again I thought of Bergeounette's song —

"Adam, Adam, entends ma voix,
Sors de ce bois." [2]

The *patron* rose, and as though he too had thought of the song, he said with annoyance, "Come along, little one, they are turning us out."

In spite of his weakness, the *patron* was always present in the morning at the arrival of the girls, and he always found droll things to say to the late-comers.

"It's the eiderdown's fault, I bet."

To Duretour, whose back hair was no tidier than it had been the day before, he said, "The pillow pulled you back by the hair, eh?"

The rest he was taking did not bring very much color

1 "In a delicious garden near the skies."
2 "Adam, Adam, hear My voice; come out of that wood."

back to his face, and he stood the noise of the machines very ill. He became timid, and soon unknown noises upset him more than was reasonable. He would place his hand over our shears to say, "Listen to that! What's doing that?"

We listened, and Mme. Dalignac made gentle fun of him in a low voice.

"That," she would say, "that's a lion coming through the keyhole."

He laughed with us, and a little color came into his cheeks.

One morning, when he had seen a little mouse rush from the rag-box, he almost became angry as he insisted that Duretour should go immediately for the neighbor's cat.

It was a big cat, born in the flat on the same floor, and it had never seen a mouse. We often met it on the landing, where it came for the caresses of the girls. As soon as it entered, it jumped on to the machines, and it went all round the workshop, smelling in every corner. Then, having seen all there was to see, it crept into an empty fixture and went peaceably to sleep.

The little mouse had a suspicion of its danger. It poked out its dainty nose several times from a hole between the wall and the upper part of the fireplace, but it did not dare to come any farther. Then as the big cat still slept, it became emboldened, and crossed the workshop to the kitchen.

It began again on the following days. Slim and nimble it passed by in its pretty gray dress, and Ber-

geounette, who watched for it, laughed to see it so clever.

However, the cat saw it; it jumped heavily from its shelf, and went after it into the kitchen. It returned soon afterwards, but its manner had changed. It came along cautiously, stretching all its body; its eyes had also become yellower, and it lengthened its claws. It made another tour of the workshop, but instead of returning to its old place, it took up a position under a stool near the fireplace. It looked as though it were asleep with its nose on its paws, but one of its ears was constantly cocked, and you could see a bright streak between its eyelids.

The little mouse was in no hurry to return, and everybody had forgotten both it and the cat, when a cry was heard so long and thin that every machine stopped and everybody looked towards the stool. The cat was still there, but it was lying on its side, and from under one of its paws the mouse's tail protruded like a piece of black string. Almost immediately the black string shook and the mouse escaped. It did not go far; the cat was in front of it, and turned it with its paw. It shammed dead for a moment, then tried to escape towards the kitchen; but the cat forestalled it again.

Then the mouse lost its head. It tried to fly anywhere and anyhow; it turned and rushed in all directions, and each time with a pat of the paw the cat brought it back to the workshop. There was a moment when we thought that it was about to resign itself to death, it trembled so and was in such a state of collapse. But suddenly it faced its torturer. It had risen so

quickly that it almost fell backwards with its spring. It remained upright, quivering and shaking its fore-paws, while its little bleeding jaws gave out a series of different cries. And we all understood that it was overwhelming with insults the enormous monster that watched it, sitting quietly with its head bent forward. Then, as though it had suddenly measured all its weakness and understood that nothing could save it, it wavered and fell back, uttering a shrill complaint. And this was so piteous that Bouledogue seized the cat by the middle of the back and threw it on the table. It came down again very quickly, but the mouse was no longer there.

The *patron* returned to his easy chair, and we could not tell whether he was annoyed or pleased when he said, "There, it has escaped."

Mme. Dalignac breathed heavily, and her two fists, which she held pressed against her bosom, opened suddenly, as if she herself had nothing more to fear.

On the following day we noticed that Gabielle was in pain. She stopped her machine and bent double for a minute; then she went on with her work without saying anything.

"Is it for to-day?" asked Bergeounette in a jocular voice. And she offered to accompany her without delay to the Maternité.

Gabielle was afraid of the hospital. In vain, we told her that the Maternité was not a hospital; she refused to believe it. And at the idea of going there thus, immediately, without time for further reflection, her

repugnance increased, and she asserted that she was only suffering from a passing pain.

Félicité Damoure, who had just had a child, took her part against the others.

"Pardi!" she said. "She has plenty of time, poor girl. When the moment comes you'll see her make quite another kind of face."

But as Gabielle continued to bend double, Bergeounette put her mantle on by main force, and made her leave the workshop.

It was a great event for us, and most of the girls went to the window to see Gabielle cross the avenue. Mme. Dalignac and the *patron* did the same, and I went up to see like them.

A heavy van drawn by three horses which was coming slowly up the avenue prevented the two women from crossing immediately, and Bergeounette took advantage of this to turn towards us and wave us farewell. We could see that Gabielle wanted to do the same, but in turning both her feet slipped from the curb, and she fell flat in front of the van.

There were shouts. The leading horse backed, reared and mounted the pavement. Then we saw Bergeounette seize the horses' bridle, while the driver, standing upright, tugged on the reins.

People ran up, but Gabielle had already risen without help and was shaking herself.

Mme. Dalignac had not waited to the end before running downstairs. She supported Bergeounette as much as Gabielle, and all three came up slowly.

Bergeounette's alert eyes were opened wide, and her dark face had taken on an earthy tinge.

"I was never so frightened in my life," she confessed.

And as she never lost an opportunity to laugh at herself as much as at others, she exaggerated her weakness with words and grimaces that restored us to a noisy gayety.

Gabielle laughed. She had refused to lie down in the *patron's* easy chair, and she refused the cordial which Mme. Dalignac offered to her. She laughed noiselessly, and her laughter had something supernatural in it. The pallor of her face also had something supernatural in it, and was no more pleasant to see than her laughter, but all the hardness of her features had gone and her eyes had become gentle and confiding. She went back to her machine, and there was no further question of confinement on that day.

Neither was there on the following and succeeding days. And although Gabielle bent double from time to time, she did not complain, and her machine made no less noise than the others.

Eight days had passed when M. Bon came to visit the *patron*. Because he had been interested in Gabielle, the *patron* told him of her fall as a funny story, but M. Bon did not think the story so funny, and he pushed his head a little forward to look at Gabielle. He had scarcely looked at her when it was as though another accident had happened. He leaned over her, seized her by the shoulder, and before she could resist he had dragged her to the door.

The windows opened as on the other occasion, and we saw Gabielle half-dragged and half-carried by M. Bon to a cab that set off immediately.

Everybody thought it was a premature confinement. Gabielle herself must have thought so, for as she passed through the cutting-room, she turned towards us a vexed face. At that moment only I had remarked her purple eyelids and her lips of so dark a color that they seemed black.

It was not long before M. Bon returned for his hat, which he had forgotten. He gave a shrug of the shoulders full of contempt for our ignorance.

"She has been carrying a dead child since the day of her fall," he said roughly.

A week later we knew that Gabielle had escaped death, and that she had borne her sufferings with the greatest courage.

On the following Sunday, at the hour for visiting the patients, I found Bergeounette at the Maternité. It was impossible to speak to Gabielle, but Bergeounette made up for that by asking a thousand questions of the nurse who held us back from the patient's bed.

The last question was the one that interested us the most.

"Was it a boy or a girl?"

The nurse had not thought of ascertaining, and with both hands she gave a gesture of indifference, as she replied, "It was only a little decomposed flesh."

We were scarcely outside when Bergeounette took me

by the arm, and said, "What luck for her that fall was!"

She added in the serious voice she sometimes had, "The child has gone away as the father came, without Gabielle's seeing the shape of his body or the color of his face."

XV

THE *patron* was now in bed with a high temperature. His condition had been aggravated by a heavy rainstorm which we had not been able to avoid, and which had kept us too long under a tree in the Luxembourg Gardens.

M. Bon was alarmed at this fever, which did not abate, in spite of cares and medicines. On the other hand, Mme. Dalignac was not troubled by it at all, and she continued to believe in the approaching recovery of her husband.

"I've seen him much worse than that," she said to the girls who questioned her and to Bergeounette, who was afraid to sing any more.

Eglantine, who had gone secretly to see M. Bon, feared the worst. She was also terrified at Mme. Dalignac's calm.

"My aunt knows nothing whatever about diseases," she said to me rapidly at the door. "She has never had a cold or an hour's feverishness; and if my uncle happens to die it will strike her like an unforeseen calamity."

I knew that Eglantine was right, but no more than she could I make Mme. Dalignac understand that her husband was in danger.

Yet everything indicated it: M. Bon's anxious and

almost angry look, the haggard eyes of the *patron,* as well as the redness of his face, formerly so pale. But all that seemed to exist only for us. When Mme. Dalignac touched the moist forehead and the hot hands of the sick man, she did not think of fever, but blamed the July heat for it. She even managed to make me share her confidence, in spite of Eglantine's warnings.

The example of Sandrine seemed to justify her. "She might have recovered with rest and care," M. Bon had said. The *patron* had not lacked rest or care; his wife had spared neither toil nor courage to procure them for him, and now that the embroidery machine was relegated to a corner and exacting customers turned away forever, Mme. Dalignac firmly believed that nothing could threaten her husband's life. And contrary to Eglantine, she retained her gentle gayety and let her pretty laugh be heard.

We were in the middle of the dead season. The making of samples and visits to the warehouse occupied all Mme. Dalignac's time, but it was easy for me to remain with the *patron,* and attend to his slightest desires. The others did not leave me in the lurch. Bouledogue, who could do housework quickly and well, took charge of the tidying and cleaning, and Duretour, who looked after the medicine bottles, ran to the chemist whenever it was necessary.

The *patron* was happy to see us so attentive. He became annoyed, however, when he saw Bergeounette climb on to the handrail of the window to clean the panes more easily.

"Eh!" he said. "Don't go breaking your paws, you enormous grasshopper." And he added, as he forced her to come down, "For the time I have left to see your windows, it doesn't matter."

He loved the noise of the workshop, and to lose nothing of it he made me leave all the doors open. There were only a few girls there. And Bouledogue's machine alone made a clapping with its treadle. Whenever she stopped, the *patron* became anxious, but when Bergeounette sang, he sat up in bed and stopped coughing. Another noise, which came at intervals, held all his attention. It was a harsh, stubborn, tearing noise.

Cr-r-ran, cr-r-ran, cr-r-ran! You would have said that it was a pair of strong jaws engaged in crunching flesh and bone. It was only Mme. Dalignac's big shears accomplishing regularly their task.

Long hot days passed without bringing the relief M. Bon expected of them. The *patron* laughed at him behind his back.

"Can't he see, then, that I'm at the end of my tether?" he said.

I let him talk and laughed with him. While I sewed near his bed he spoke to me of his wife. Everything he had to say of her was to her praise, and if pain cut him short, reminding him that death was near, it did not frighten him, and he repeated to me what he had already told me a hundred times:

"With her, I've had my share of happiness."

Following a visit from Clément on leave, he forgot his wife a little to speak to me of my future marriage.

He spoke in isolated phrases that required no answer:

"Living alone is a joyless life."

There was a silence, and he went on:

"You can't live without joy."

But one day, when his fever was worse, he said suddenly, "He is nothing but pride." I waited, not knowing whether he was still speaking of Clément. And as I raised my head he said again, "You won't be happy with him."

His sunken body seemed to yield to sleep; yet he went on in the same dull, weak voice, "His heart is like a burnt road, on which you will meet neither spring nor shade."

What with the noise, and the distance she was away, Mme. Dalignac had certainly not been able to hear, and I did not understand why she entered the room so quickly, and why she remained so long looking at us each in turn.

She touched her husband's hands, kissed him on the forehead, and went away as silently as she had come.

The *patron* listened for a moment to the shears as they began once more to bite, and his eyes, which had closed on the departure of his wife, opened again when he said to me, "Living near her, you'll acquire her gentleness and courage."

I dared not ask him what he meant by his other words, and he spoke to me no more of Clément.

Eglantine came soon afterwards to spend the nights with her uncle, as I spent the days. When she arrived, a little before sunset, the *patron* received her with a

fine smile of gratitude; then he went heavily to sleep for an hour or two. These were his only hours of real rest, for all the remainder of the night he choked or fidgeted uselessly.

For us, too, they were the only hours of real rest. After our dinner, we all three gathered together in the workshop, and although we had no secrets to tell each other, we spoke in a low voice and did not light the lamp.

Here, again, I heard some talk of Clément. Mme. Dalignac vaunted his qualities of heart, and extolled certain traits of his character.

"He is active and intelligent, and never will any one belonging to him know what poverty is."

Eglantine did not contradict her: on the contrary, to the praise of Clément, she added the grateful affection which he had devoted to the *patron,* and she predicted quite another kind of affection for the wife and children who would share his home. Mme. Dalignac did not forget either that it was to him she owed the happiness of her life. And as though the knowledge of the past was a bond that would tie me still more strongly to her nephew, she told me one evening how her marriage had taken place.

When she had had to replace her sister as guardian of the three orphans, the two girls had not given her much trouble, but it had not been the same with their brother. This urchin of ten had proved hard, insolent, and self-willed. He answered caress with derision, and reproof with outbursts of rage which frightened his aunt and his sisters.

Yet this child, who was so difficult to manage, worked well at school, and was considered a docile and respectful boy. His docility and his respect were no less towards Dalignac, the embroiderer, who came almost every day to take away or bring back work to the workshop. And thus the young adoptive mother had come to understand that, in order to bring up a boy, the authority of a man was necessary.

On the other hand, the embroiderer, who had always been retiring and timid, had grown bold by becoming the big comrade of the child. He joined the little family in its walks of an evening, and he never missed running with Clément round the trees and benches.

The two girls had immediately begun to surmise. "It's me he wants for his wife," said Rose, who was already as lovely as a marriageable girl.

"If it's me he loves," said Eglantine in turn, "he'll have to wait until I'm fifteen."

Although she laughed with the two girls, their aunt thought as Rose did, and built up for her and her young brother a fine future.

This had lasted until the evening when Dalignac had abruptly left the children to walk by the side of their aunt. The mysterious air of the embroiderer had held the children back during the whole of the walk, but after his departure the two girls had asked together —

"Is it me he loves?"

"Neither," their aunt replied.

And laughing at their discomfiture, she told them

that it was herself whom the embroiderer had just asked in marriage.

This memory, which to-day filled the two women with great gayety, did not, however, make Eglantine raise her voice as she said, "Yes, and your laugh then sounded so clear that I saw for the first time your beautiful shining hair and your figure, which was much better molded than ours."

There was a moment's silence.

In the feeble light which came from without, I saw Eglantine's fingers playing with a lock of hair that had escaped from Mme. Dalignac's comb. She lengthened it out gently, and when she let it go, the lock of hair curled up again and returned to its place immediately.

"What you never knew," went on Eglantine suddenly, "is the trouble we took that evening to find out your age. Rose added I don't know how many tens of years to her fifteen, and I started on calculations that I never came to the end of."

She laughed silently.

"Finally," she went on, "we thought of your First Communion picture which was hanging on the wall of our room. We did not dare take it down, for fear of being discovered by you, and we both climbed on to the same chair with the lamp. We could not make out the writing. It had in a way melted into the parchment, and all that remained was the name of the month of May printed in large black letters. Rose even passed a wet finger over the glass, but it did not make the date of your birth any clearer."

The laughter of Eglantine joined Mme. Dalignac's once again, but although it was almost silent, I recognized each as I recognized their clasped hands, in spite of the darkness. And while they exchanged caresses and affectionate words, I thought of the First Communion picture, which was now in the *patron's* room. I saw its obliterated writing and the lost date, and I imagined the communicants, boys and girls, rising from the Holy Table, and joining each other in couples, as at a marriage, when the newly-wed pair leave the church.

On another evening, Mme. Dalignac told us the whole story of her childhood — a sad childhood, of which she retained a timorous memory full of bitterness.

Her mother had never been able to forgive her for having come into the world at a time when she thought that she was safe from maternity.

"You shame me," she used to say to her.

And she never permitted her to laugh and play with other little girls. Up to the age of six, the child had known the caresses of her father, but at the death of the worthy man she was left with the threatening hatred of her mother. When she was serving her apprenticeship she had had to make her way to the dressmaker who employed her by a long, roundabout and dirty, deserted street. Her going and coming were carefully watched, and when one day, led away by her comrades, she had dared to return by way of the finest street in the town, her mother had beaten her with such ferocity that she had nearly lost her life. And

always she heard these words, which she never understood: "You shame me."

She grew up, however, and with her eighteenth year came the strength which enabled her to throw off the fear inspired by her mother. She even brought home songs learned in the workshop. But she soon stopped them when they drew on her sarcasms like, "You're singing to attract lovers."

"No," she replied, "I'm singing because I am happy."

Happy! How dared she be happy with the shame she carried about with her.

But one Sunday, watching the spring burst into flower, the girl had forgotten the shame her mother talked of, and suddenly she began to laugh. First of all she did not know why she was laughing; then hearing this clear ringing sound, she did not recognize it as her own. She thought that it came from without, like the swallows that entered by one window and flew out by the other, but a moment later she understood that this laughter had entered above all to make a noise, for it became louder, it spread, it rang out to the four corners of the house.

But it did not go any farther. A shock, rapid as lightning, fell upon it and killed it.

"It was my last stage of suffering," said Mme. Dalignac to us, raising her gentle face a little. She paused, as though she were giving herself the time to shut a door which should not have been opened, and she added: "The dressmaker who employed me took pity on my

swollen mouth, and on the following day I left the country secretly with an English family."

Our evenings passed thus, one by one, and each one brought us a little nearer to each other. Sometimes a fit of coughing from the *patron* brought us to our feet in the middle of a sentence, and we separated until the next morning.

Mme. Doublé, who came often enough to see her brother, did not exactly bring with her words of tenderness. On the pretext of making him forget his illness, she bullied him and reproached him harshly with his inactivity. She even made him get up and walk about the room when Mme. Dalignac was not there. The result for the *patron* was a state of fatigue and discontent that increased his fever and made his choking fits longer.

"She puts fire on my burns," he said.

He divined her arrival, although she never came at the same hours, and before she had knocked at the door, he announced, "Here comes Madame 'I order.'"

She did, in fact, order; and, moreover, she criticized everything the doctor advised. She became frightened, however, on the morning when I signed to her to hold her peace. The *patron* had had a long fainting fit in the night, and M. Bon had warned Eglantine that he was approaching the end.

She was with us, as it happened, the gentle Eglantine. She had not been able to tear herself away from the sick man, and on her drawn face could be seen the

effort she was making to find a means to prepare Mme. Dalignac for her misfortune.

Mme. Doublé must also have gone secretly to see M. Bon as soon as she had left us, for the same evening she came back noiselessly to the workshop. She had lost her arrogant air, but even so her voice lacked gentleness, when she said to Mme. Dalignac, "Do you know that my brother is very ill?"

Mme. Dalignac gave a start, as if she had just been informed of a new illness of her husband's.

"The poor man, he'll perhaps be dead to-morrow," went on Mme. Doublé, softening her voice a little.

And as Mme. Dalignac looked at her with distrust she poked out her thumb, and said, "Ask these young women then."

Eglantine made one quick step forward that brought her near to me, and her hand clutched firmly on to mine. Mme. Dalignac saw us thus; she asked no question; but her features became distorted, and she sat down abruptly on the table.

As if he had waited for this warning to die, the *patron* called us, "Eh, come here."

His glance wandered hesitatingly over our four bent faces, but when he had recognized his wife he kept his eyes fixed on her face. For a moment he seemed to be listening for a familiar sound, and he said, as though disappointed, "Ah! yes, the day's work is over."

And immediately afterwards his respiration weakened.

He died painlessly, almost upright, and his last sigh,

long, rough and jerky, made me think of the noise of his embroidery machine.

As for our overtime vigils, two lamps were lit for the vigil of death.

Mme. Doublé filled the workshop with cries and lamentations, and Mme. Dalignac, who wandered round silent and tearless, knocked herself against the cutting table each time that it came in her way.

At each of these collisions something fell from the table. The French chalk went first, and the measuring tape followed it, hissing and twisting like some evil beast that has been awakened. Then a piece of silk half-unrolled fell down, and we had to pick it up to prevent it from puffing out and slipping with a rustle underneath our feet.

The big shears themselves finally jumped from the table. Their double points stuck into the flooring, and they stood upright and alarming like a closed barrier.

The heat of midnight was no less sultry than that of noon. Not a breath of air came from above. The stars shone dimly in the black sky, and on the avenue the chestnut-trees were as motionless as if they had gone to sleep forever.

A little after midnight Mme. Doublé's noisy sorrow subsided, and the weary limbs of Mme. Dalignac compelled her to sit down. She took her usual place between Eglantine and me. And the silence that brooded over everything outside entered the house immediately.

XVI

Since Mlle. Herminie had had at her disposal a few francs more each week than were sufficient for her ordinary expenses, the boulevards and gardens of Paris no longer satisfied her. She wanted to follow the crowd of Parisians who went each Sunday into the country, and to do so she rose early and took some pleasure in her toilet. I was also happy myself to escape for a whole day from the town, and together we set out happy and bustling as for a far-off and wonderful country. Oftenest a tram took us only to the suburbs, but at other times the train carried us much farther, and it was then that Mlle. Herminie fancied that she had recovered a little of the country she had left and which she regretted so bitterly. The journey was itself like a festival for us. From the moment we left Paris, there were on each side of the railway immense market gardens, with their hundreds of glass bells in lines, shining in the sun like lakes of bright water. Then came the orchards. Spring had beflowered them with white and pink. And when the month of June had reddened the first fruits, it covered at the same time the broad embankments of the railway with wild poppies. The speed of the train mixed everything, and we could not

tell whether the flowers were cherries or whether the cherries were wild poppies.

The Chevreuse Valley captured our preferences.

Lozère especially delighted Mlle. Herminie. The hills were a little lacking in vines for her liking, but the slopes covered with strawberry plants and with frail peach trees pleased her more than the plain with its fields of oats and wheat.

After a morning's walk along the road or byways, we stopped at a little inn under a sort of shed open to all the winds and built specially for Parisians on Sunday. A sparrow had made its nest there at the point where a beam crossed a pillar that supported the roof. The young ones thrust their heads fearlessly over the edge of the nest, and the parents ventured as far as the tables to take the breadcrumbs. There was such silence in the valley that nobody dared to speak loudly under the shed. The dishes were long in coming, but nobody became impatient, and everybody smiled on the servant, who laughed without hurrying herself. Then we set out again, but whether we were walking along a road in the sun, or seated in the cool shade of a wood, Mlle. Herminie always recalled some memory that lightened our feet or prolonged our rest. The high and narrow houses that we met on the road gave her occasion to praise the width and depth of the one in which she was born, and the tiny garden of a fine villa, where selected pebbles replaced the verdure, made her say, "My garden was full of flowers and foliage, and when the sun entered it after the rain, the leaves took on

such wonderful colors and bedecked themselves with such sparkling drops of water that they became more beautiful than the flowers."

Seeing my astonishment that she could have left of her own free will a spot that was so dear to her, she went on quickly, "The garden held me back for three years after the death of my parents, but the empty house frightened me; the silence at nights prevented me from sleeping, and my health suffered."

She made a long pause, and continued, "And then, I lost my work. The women no longer brought their dresses to me to make."

She added as though angry: "That was my fault too. . . . I carried my sorrow like an infirmity."

There was some rancor in the sound of her voice, and I dared then to ask her, "What did you do on the day of your sweetheart's marriage?"

To my great surprise, she replied simply, "I went to the church, and I prayed a long time for his happiness."

And thus our Sundays followed one another, filled with the open air and gentle words. And as I listened to Mlle. Herminie, I seemed to receive from her the precious gift of a very long life, made up of love and courage, of wretchedness and regrets.

Fine weather did not always favor us. The roads were sometimes transformed into quagmires and the flowered walks into bogs, but we only laughed, so great was our joy at being in the open air. Often, even after night had fallen, we lingered to listen to the pure song of the toads in the ditches. The coolness of the

earth penetrated us, and the moon froze us like a damp cloth. On the warm evenings of July we allowed the return trains to pass without being able to make up our minds to go home. We had, however, to take the last, a packed and noisy train, which rushed us back to the town, the lights of which on our arrival surprised us and dazzled us.

As for Burgundy, we contented ourselves by making plans to go there. It was not for lack of talking about it at the workshop, however. While giving detailed accounts of our Sunday outings, the old woman never ceased to deplore the fact that her country was not in the neighborhood of Paris.

Mme. Dalignac, who was always affected by the distress of others, in spite of her own sorrow, finally said to me, "Take her."

And as we were on the eve of the 15th of August, she decided to grant us three days for the journey.

Three days to spend in her country! Mlle. Herminie could not believe it. She became so nervous that we were frightened for her health, and she began to weep.

"They're good tears," she said to reassure us.

But a sudden fear came to her.

"Supposing I were to die after so much happiness."

"That doesn't matter," replied Mme. Dalignac, who did not know her fear of death; "you'll die happy at least."

On the morning of our departure, it rained in torrents. All night a storm had thundered over Paris, and now the wind blew the rain, which came tapping

against the windows and made the gutters of the roof overflow. I hesitated before waking Mlle. Herminie; but at the first gentle tap on her door, she came out completely dressed.

"Oh," she said to me, "to prevent me from starting it would have to be a different rain from that!"

And in the street, her umbrella in one hand and her skirts held up by the other, she went along so rapidly that I could scarcely keep up with her.

The journey passed without a word. She kept her eyes lowered, or looked at the other travelers indifferently, and the stations passed without her paying the least attention to them. She would even have let pass her own station, if I had not warned her that we were entering it. Then, she was the first at the door; she opened it with a firm hand, and jumped out on to the platform — fr-r-rout! like a swallow, as she had jumped from the vintage cart in her youth. Only, although her black dress did not catch in the footstep, she tucked up her skirts so high that she showed all the embroidery on her white petticoat.

The whole day was one of wonders. According to Mlle. Herminie, there was nothing to be compared to the river that cut the town in two, nor to the main street that descended as rapidly as a torrent, and the uneven cobbles of which prevented us from putting our feet down squarely.

Until the evening, we did nothing but walk from street to street, and talk with old people whom she recognized as she passed. But just as we were going to bed,

she clasped her hands as in prayer, and said, "Where is the man who made me weep so much?"

On the following day she took me to the vines. Nearly all looked wretched, and several of them seemed very sickly. Mlle. Herminie did not recognize them. At this time of the year, when the vine-stems should have disappeared beneath the leaves and the bunches of grapes, you could see only black wood and burnt foliage.

"Where are the vine-dressers, then?" said the old woman, looking all around her.

And the roads stretched out with neither workers nor carts upon them. And these vines, which I had expected to see splendid and noisy, showed in the whole stretch of them nothing but sickness and desertion.

Before us Saint-Jacques Hill lay high and broad with the same lean and withered vines, but at the summit, right in the middle, a large bare space shone in the sun and drew our eyes. As we advanced, this square stood out more brilliantly and clearly, and Mlle. Herminie stopped suddenly to ask me, "What is it?"

"It's stubble," I replied immediately, for as we approached I had recognized the yellow and shining straw of wheat.

Mlle. Herminie choked. She lifted up her hand as at the announcement of some irreparable disaster.

"Wheat in our vines!" she exclaimed. Then she crossed herself slowly, saying in a low voice, "Lord, have pity on us!"

And instead of going on, she went back and sat down on a heap of props that were rotting at the edge of the road.

A very old vine-dresser, who was painfully climbing a cross-path, came and sat near us, recognizing Mlle. Herminie, but instead of speaking of their youth, as I expected, they spoke only of the vine.

The old man loved it too. He had spent his whole life cultivating it and embellishing it. Old age, by taking away his strength, alone had compelled him to rest. But he could not leave it. Since it had been sick, he visited it each day with a great pity. At the beginning, he had pulled off here and there a bad leaf, without believing greatly in the seriousness of its disease, but he was well aware now that it was going to die.

"So much, so much good wine it has given," he said.

And his mouth remained open as though to allow of the passing of a long regret. He turned his head towards the stubble-field above, and when his eyes came back to the vine, he said resignedly, "It's perhaps because it's too old, it too."

He left us to make his way back down the path. He was so bent that his forehead touched the vine-shoots as he passed. And behind him a young lad with robust arms climbed the same path with a barrow loaded with dead vine-stems which he tipped with one movement into the ditch.

Mlle. Herminie was silent. She kept her eyes fixed on three large, clumsy elm-trees which could be seen in the distance, and which resembled three old men

with their heads together, telling each other a secret.

"Once upon a time," she said suddenly, "they were called the three little ladies."

She rose, and went on, "They, too, have seen the vine in its loveliness. Then it was fresh and healthy with leaves the color of honey."

She made a gesture of disgust.

"Now it's like moldy bread."

Her joy had gone, and her arm weighed heavily on mine as we descended the hill. Yet the grassy roads that crossed and ran into one another were full of grasshoppers and butterflies. At each step we took they rose in dozens. On the ground, they blended with the dust and the grasses; but when they flew up, their spread wings showed all the colors of flowers.

The road she led me through at the bottom was bordered with poplar trees, which rustled endlessly in the warm air. By its side flowed the river full and clear, and its whispering mounted towards the trees, and increased their joyous noise.

Mlle. Herminie sought for a place to sit down again, and not finding one she leaned against one of the poplars. Her eyes wandered from one spot to another, and she said slowly, "Isn't everything sad here!"

I protested in spite of myself.

"Sad! This lovely road and that pretty river traveling in company and seeming to laugh together all along the way."

Mlle. Herminie's astonished air stopped me from going further, and I dared not tell her that it was her

own sadness that she was casting over everything. She had just acquired so great a quantity of it, that she could no longer carry it, and she had to let some of it escape. The spot made her still more bitter. It was at this same place that, after several years, chance had brought her face to face with the man she loved.

"It was in the spring," she said, and in the song of the foliage and the water, her voice seemed harsh to me; "I was walking with my sister, who was proudly carrying her beautiful infant in her arms. He stopped short as he saw us, and the woman with him did the same. She, too, was carrying a beautiful infant in her arms, and she stared at me without saying anything. Then I began to speak; I didn't know quite what I was saying, but I spoke because the silence was too much for me."

Mlle. Herminie stopped for a moment. Then her whole face became puckered with suffering, and her old hands went up in one movement to her ears as she went on hollowly: "Oh! that silence! it became so terrible that I took fear and I fled towards the house, running as fast as I could."

We were slowly approaching the house. It was a little withdrawn from the road, with a garden in front full of pink rose-trees.

Two fair young girls were sewing there in the shade of an old vine-arbor. They raised their heads at our approach, and their hands stopped sewing.

Mlle. Herminie touched the latch of the gate, as if

she was about to enter the garden; but she did not do so.

"Nothing is changed," was all she said in her ordinary voice. She lowered it a little to add, "The fairest one there, see? The slenderest, that's me."

Yes, that was exactly what Mlle. Herminie must have been like. For a second I had the illusion of seeing her at the age of twenty, and I could not help smiling at the young girl, who, smiling too, watched us depart.

We returned to the town, and the river was already darkening beneath the bridge which joined the two banks, when Mlle. Herminie turned abruptly into a narrow lane, in order to return by a roundabout way behind the house with the pink rose-trees.

On this side the house seemed much smaller. A vine covered its whole width, and left free only a back door and two rounded windows above. The rays of the setting sun fell upon the roof, and made the white chimneys appear pink.

The kitchen-garden stretched right up to us. It was an immense garden, all length, in which the vines framed the vegetables, and where the rose-trees also had their place. The fruit-trees, which had grown where chance had placed them, were, for the most part, peaches. One of them, overloaded with fruit, was leaning its branches on forked stakes, and around it the bees and the wasps made a great concert of hummings. On the highest branch, a redbreast twittered, "Tzille-tzille, Terruis-tzille, Tzille-tzille." He hurried as though he must absolutely finish his song before night. He was of the

same color as the peaches, and he seemed himself a fruit that the sun had reddened in places.

A short distance from the kitchen-garden was a cottage made of old bricks and planks. All round this cottage was nothing but rubbish and stones, but from the middle of this mixture rose a fig-tree so thick in leaves that it prevented the people of the house from seeing what went on behind it.

This was the spot chosen by Mlle. Herminie to sit down. She knew this fig-tree well; it had grown there nobody knew how, and its knotty, gentle branches looked like limbs that had been broken and badly set. She knew well, too, the old cottage, which was scarcely more broken-down than it had been in her time. She had sheltered there on the rainy days of her childhood, and she had taken refuge there later on to weep her lost love undisturbed. The fig-tree and the cottage seemed difficult to separate; they appeared to be welded together; and while the wall and the planks bulged outwards as a support, the fig-tree lay its branches along the roof, as if to hold the broken tiles that threatened to fall.

The noises of the evening sounded clear in the distance. Thin, transparent smoke rose from the houses, and the few white specks we saw moving in the vine spread over the roads and the paths.

The young man we had seen on the hill passed once more in front of us. He had left his barrow behind him, and he was going home with empty hands and a flower in his lips. He took out the flower when he perceived us, and he looked at us as though he were

surprised to find us there. Then his careless air returned, and he went off singing in a loud voice —

"Je l'ai menée à la claire fontaine,
Je l'ai menée à la claire fontaine.
Quand elle fut là elle ne voulut point boire,
Dondaine,
Don.
C'est l'amour qui nous mène,
Don-don." [1]

Mlle. Herminie followed him with her eyes as far as the turn of the road.

The three elm-trees, which were now nearer to us, seemed all the older and the more shapeless. They were the only large trees in the neighborhood, and the birds came from all sides to lodge in their branches. You could hear them chirping all together, as if each one was giving an account of what he had done during the day. You also heard a furious caterwauling, and a whole flock of them flew away. A few only returned to the branches, and immediately there was calm.

The sun had gone down, taking with it its light, but before darkness had come, another light rose opposite the sunset — a mysterious, veiled brightness which grew timidly, like some forbidden thing. And suddenly the moon appeared on the summit of the hill. It was enormous and yellow, and its black-daubed face seemed to

[1] "I took her to the clear fountain. I took her to the clear fountain. When she was there she would not drink, dondaine, don. It is love that leads us, don-don."

be leaning cautiously forward to assure itself that nothing would trouble its passage in the course of the night. The cool wind accompanying it seemed to be running before it. It hustled the sparse foliage of the vines at the same time as it swept away the light clouds that lingered in the sky. It knocked against us before it entered the kitchen-garden, where it shook with the same roughness the cabbages and the rose-trees, and it penetrated the fig-tree, where it remained a long moment turning over the broad leaves and whistling in the holes of the cottage.

Mlle. Herminie was speaking in a clear, sing-song voice, and, in spite of the wind which blew on her mouth, I heard, "The day he went away, his kiss was no less tender than it had been the day before, nor his hands less caressing. And when he had shut the garden-door behind him, he turned as he had done the other times to look towards the door of the house, where I still stood."

She stopped suddenly. One of the windows of the house had just lit up, and two shadows moved in the light; they moved about a long time and they often merged. Then the window opened wide, and the light went out.

"We, too, would have left the window open on the garden," said Mlle. Herminie to me in a low tone.

And once more she gave voice to her regrets, which flew away lightly and discreetly like the night-birds that brushed by us with no announcement of their coming.

A very long time passed. The wind had left us to run farther afield, and the breeze that replaced it was so gentle that the leaves did not even stir at its approach.

All around us, a white vapor covered the earth like a fine carpet, while overhead, facing us, the moon, now shining and pure, surpassed in brilliancy everything that shone in the firmament.

Everything was at rest. The dogs had stopped barking in the distance. The vines near at hand seemed like sleeping ponds, and the three elm-trees, all whitened with light at the summit, seemed to have put on a cap for the night.

A sort of howl suddenly rose near me. It sounded like the plaint of a young dog, and it was some time before I understood that it was Mlle. Herminie who was weeping. Seated on the crumbling stones, her hands hanging limply and her head flung back beneath the moon, she was uttering a long and monotonous cry, as though she was hurling into space a call agreed upon in order that her sorrow might be gathered and nothing lost of it.

A fig-leaf fell behind us; it fell heavily like a too ripe fruit, and its noise stopped the wailing. One moment still Mlle. Herminie remained motionless; then she rose, and took my arm.

"Let us be off! Let us be off!" she said.

And instead of going back to the town which she had desired so much to see again, she turned her back to it and dragged me towards the station.

XVII

The workshop was again enlarged. The doors that led from one room to another were taken down, and the furniture huddled together to make room for new machines. In spite of all this, when November brought back the rain and the cold, orders became so numerous that the girls in the workshop no longer sufficed, and it was necessary to take on ten outside workers.

The housewives in the neighborhood knew that at Mme. Dalignac's the work was better paid than elsewhere, so that at every hour of the day they came to take work away. Many of them, however, went away disappointed when they saw the elegance of the work. "Ah! you do good work," they said; and without taking their eyes off the model, they added, "I only know how to do common work."

And folding up their black wrappers, they went away slowly.

We were left with Bonne-Mère. She was a widow, still young, with five children. Her two eldest, Marinette and Charlet, were already helping her. Marinette, who was not yet twelve, sewed almost as well as her mother, and Charlet, who had just reached ten, earned a few pence selling flowers after school hours. The urchin rarely came up to the workshop. He remained below to look after his little brothers, while he

sold his flowers. You heard only his piping voice, "Buy a flower, ladies."

Sometimes it was lemons he had in his basket. He would forget this, and still invite the ladies to buy flowers.

Then Bonne-Mère would smile and say to us, "Listen to the fool."

Another came whom Bergeounette immediately nicknamed Mme. Berdandan. For the first time since the death of the *patron,* Mme. Dalignac laughed heartily, the name fitted the newcomer so well. She was so tall, so broad, and so heavy that the floor trembled as she passed over it, and she swayed so in her walk that you feared somewhat that she might fall over.

But there was no heaviness either in her character or her voice. She sang as she spoke, and her mouth never opened except to say jolly things or to bring good news. "A real lucky bell," said Bergeounette.

And when Mme. Berdandan went off with her parcel in her arms, Bergeounette never failed to imitate the slow and heavy sound of an enormous bell beginning to ring.

Very different was Mlle. Grance, in spite of her fifty years or more. Her little, well-made body was in perfect harmony with her simple air and childish voice, but her blouses were always too short and her skirts swept the ends of thread and the pins that lay about the floor.

While Mme. Dalignac was examining her work and preparing more for her, she swayed on the tips of her

toes, and mumbled quickly with her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Duretour crept slyly up to her to try to make out what she was saying, but she did not manage to do so. And each time she asked her, "Are you saying a prayer, mademoiselle?"

Each time, too, Mlle. Grance lowered her eyes suddenly, as though astonished at finding herself there. She smiled without replying, and went on with her mumbling and her swaying. Then, with the corners of her wrapper tied up like knots of ribbon, she carried off her parcel and kept her secret.

Duretour had now not a minute to lose. She brought the materials and took back the garments by cabfuls. The cabbies knew her well; her pretty figure and her good humor brought smiles to the face of the surliest, and all were happy to take her in spite of her load of parcels.

At the workshop, she no longer had time to describe her Sunday outings, nor to enumerate a quantity of dishes unknown to us. And when, on Monday, Bergeounette asked her as of old, "What did you have good to eat yesterday?" she always replied, as if to get it over quickly, "Stewed pullet."

But although she no longer gave herself time to talk, she made up for it with café-concert choruses; and as she sewed the tickets on to the neck of the garments, she sang in a quavering voice —

"Paris, Paris,
Paradis de la femme."

Mme. Dalignac only went to the firm of Quibu to show her samples and to fix their price. She took me with her to give her more assurance, but my presence did not prevent the buyer from lowering the prices by a quarter, when it was not a half, and Mme. Dalignac, who was unable to defend her own interests more than five minutes, gave way, almost ready to weep for impotence. She envied the other women, who fought, shouted, and went away, having almost always obtained what they desired. One of them especially disputed fiercely with arguments that were beside the point. And red and out of breath, she always finished up by saying to the buyer, "You only have the trouble of selling here."

During the hours of waiting, the women talked among themselves. The boldest disparaged the firm of Quibu, and their advice was to stand up to it, while the timid spoke only of being firm with the workgirls.

A little, gentle-looking woman, who made her models in a series, and whose prices scarcely varied, said in turn, "Once upon a time, I was content with a deduction of fifty centimes for each garment from my girls; but since I've had a child, I've doubled it, and the work goes on just the same."

And when Mme. Dalignac asked her whether her girls earned a living, she replied, "I'm certain they don't; but I must earn mine."

They did not all think in this way; but they were all astonished because Mme. Dalignac was not a big dressmaker, instead of a contractor for fine models.

Clément was also astonished to see his aunt continuing this trade. As soon as he had returned from military service, he began to take an interest in the business of the workshop, and Mme. Dalignac had hoped that he would replace the *patron;* but at the first word on this subject, Clément had shaken his head.

"No," he said, "I want to be master in my house."

And a few days afterwards he had started as a workman with an upholsterer on the big boulevards. On Sunday morning, while we were cleaning up the workshop, he put the account books in order. He did it quickly and much better than we did, and when he had made out the very complicated accounts of the firm of Quibu, he asked his aunt, "Where's your profit?"

"It will come," replied Mme. Dalignac.

"And your rent which is behindhand?"

"I'll pay it soon."

"And that Jew's machines on which you have only paid installments?"

"Don't be afraid, he won't lose anything."

She gave all these replies in a calm voice, as if they were trifling matters, easy of arrangement. But the landlord appeared more and more often to claim his due, and the Jew came each Saturday before the girls were paid, to be sure of carrying away a small sum.

Mme. Dalignac did not seem to worry herself about their demands. She spoke only of creating models, in order to employ a lot of women. Nothing upset her more than to see a woman go away with an empty wrapper. To those in the workshop she said, "If you

don't understand anything, don't be afraid to ask me."

And she demonstrated and explained with untiring patience.

Her gentleness and her goodness did not shield her from insults. A woman who looked ill came in one morning, and without any reason began to ride the high horse. She seemed to have entered with abuse in her mouth, and her first words were, "It's because you're living too well that I have to rot."

Her eyes looked dreadful in her thin face, and she began to faint before she had exhausted her anger.

Mme. Dalignac stood as though she were nailed to her place. But she raised a finger and said, "Give her a glass of sugared water."

The sick woman drank slowly, with hiccoughs of suffocation; then she spat the last mouthful at the feet of Mme. Dalignac, and said hatefully, "Take that, you evil woman, there's your glass of sugared water."

And as she turned too quickly to go away, Mme. Dalignac put out her arm sharply to save her from the corner of the table.

Mme. Doublé was no less astonished than Clément at her sister-in-law's remaining a garment-maker. For some time past, she had been offering to Mme. Dalignac a partnership, which, according to her, would bring them both a large clientèle and a very comfortable living.

Mme. Dalignac would create the models and see to

the fitting, and Mme. Doublé would keep the accounts and would look after the workgirls.

Immediately after the *patron's* death, she had become our neighbor, had Mme. Doublé, and on her door, which was side by side with ours, could be read in golden letters these two names coupled together: "Doublé–Dalignac." This proximity allowed her to make repeated visits. As always, she took occasion on these visits to criticize everything we did, and when she found nothing to say about the work she went for Mme. Dalignac. She made her responsible for the loss of her customers, who were leaving her one by one, because she did not offer them the varied models she once had. And one day, when she was more cross than usual, she reproved Mme. Dalignac for her lack of smartness, and shamed her for her shabby clothes.

"I'll buy others," said Mme. Dalignac quietly.

"With what? Good Lord! with what?" shouted Mme. Doublé, beside herself.

"Why, with money," replied Mme. Dalignac absent-mindedly.

Mme. Doublé went off in a rage, leaving the door open behind her.

Gabielle was still the cleverest workwoman. She had a way of her own with her work that the others imitated without ever being able to equal.

She had come back to her machine before she had quite recovered; but for some time now her lovely round

cheeks and her gayety had returned to her. It was noticeable, however, that her blouse was tightly buttoned, and that her waist was firmly encircled by a leather belt.

Jacques still hoped that she would become his wife, but, although she did not avoid him as before, she had none the more any apparent intention of marrying him. Her thoughts were bent solely on working hard and earning enough to buy furniture which would allow her to leave the hotel in which she lived.

The unfortunate Jacques — as Mme. Dalignac called him — was often with us, and he continued to lament his separation from his children, without doing anything to end it.

Meeting him so often at the house, Clément had finally made friends with him, and he brought him from different quarters useful pieces of information concerning the means to be adopted to recover the children. Jacques thanked him affectionately, then looked towards Gabielle and said, "If she were my wife, she would know how to go about it."

Clément also thought that a marriage between Gabielle and Jacques would be a good thing. He spoke to me about it in this way: "She would command, he would obey, and all would go well."

However, as this marriage seemed less and less possible, Mme. Dalignac advised Jacques to take the steps that would restore his children to him as quickly as possible.

"Courage! Come!" she said to him one day.

Jacques made a movement with his whole body, as though warding off something or other, and his two arms flung before him made me think of the little mouse with its two paws stretched towards the monster that was getting ready to devour it.

"Courage!" he said, sitting down heavily. And he began to weep.

Clément laughed in a cruel, contemptuous way, but Mme. Dalignac said a few gentle words of hope.

Bouledogue had not, like Gabielle, a fund of ideas, but her delicate fingers cleverly pushed the materials beneath the needle of the machine, and her hems and seams never deviated by a hair's-breadth. She no longer growled as in the time of the customers. She only took up a large amount of space all round her, without worrying herself whether any remained for her neighbors. And when her machine went wrong, she abused it, and hit it hard.

Bergeounette had left her husband. She had come out of their last battle so knocked about that her wounds had taken more than a month to heal. Feeling herself free, she was filled with exuberant joy. She moved her elbows about like wings and raised her feet for no reason.

Her husband, all repentance, watched for her as she left the workshop, in the hope of inducing her to come

back. But she would not be moved. He could be seen at times when he should have been at his work, sitting on a bench in the avenue opposite our windows.

Gabielle, who did not like seeing men do nothing, said, "What's he killing time there for?"

"Time will kill him too," replied Bergeounette, laughing. At the idea of seeing her husband put beneath the earth, she sang gayly —

"On sonnera les cloches
Avec des pots cassés."[1]

Roberte, who had not lost the habit of blundering, said of Bergeounette, "She's as merry as a brig in the water."

Roberte's stupid sayings always made the others laugh at her expense, but it did not annoy her. She struck a pretentious attitude for another absurd phrase, and everything was said.

On the other hand, Félicité Damoure took very ill any imitation of her accent, and her disagreeable remarks kept a continual cavil going in her neighborhood. She took very ill, too, to the idea of a workshop where nobody ruled, and where each worker had a different way of doing her work. In the bustle of the moments of delivery, she remained bewildered, and always when calm had returned she shouted in an angry voice, "Where there's nobody to command, there is only disorder."

She regretted the *patron,* who could command and

[1] "They will sound the bells with broken pots."

put everybody in her place, and she sometimes tried to imitate him; but there was no lack of rejoinder. Bergeounette did not spare her raillery.

"Only one order from you, beautiful Damoure," she said, "and disorder would come up at the gallop."

And as Félicité Damoure did not know what to reply to Bergeounette, she decided to laugh with the others.

"It's always the same thing here," she said. "When you think you've made a girl, you've only made a boy."

Among the women who were too near to one another, there was no lack of quarrels. They broke out without any one's knowing why, and the girl who shouted the loudest was not always the one in the right.

Mme. Dalignac stopped the hubbub merely by appearing at the door. Leaning with both hands on the door-posts, she was so tall, so calm and so serious that the shouts changed immediately into murmurs.

When everything was quiet, she said slowly, "Try to love each other a little then."

At evening, I found Mlle. Herminie in my room. Her health no longer permitted her to come to the workshop, and the work she brought home was never finished in time. At the end of the day she came to meet me, and we came gently back up the avenue.

Oh, how old she was now! Her blue eyes, which had been so clear a few months before, seemed quite dimmed, and instead of lips she had what looked like two thin rose-leaves rolled up and dry. Her character

was changing too. She became angry over nothing. Little ridiculous angers in which her weak voice spoke only of killing.

Even a poor lank cat that came timidly along the gutter to beg at our window roused her anger and made her say, "Oh, that cat, I'll kill it thrice!"

Her back became more bent, and she lost consciousness of herself for whole days together. On those days, she remained in bed without anger or care; but the moment her reason returned she left her bed in fear of death.

"Why die?" she said.

To hear her you would have thought that it was easy to avoid that misfortune.

She no longer spoke of her past. Once only, in a moment of distress, she had made an allusion to our journey, saying, "I've destroyed everything, and I no longer know where to rest."

She, who had been so curious, no longer took an interest in anything. Outside, she walked with lowered head, and in the house she dozed, leaning against the back of her chair, or buried in her old armchair. My future marriage even left her indifferent, and she scarcely looked at Clément. Only a young negro, who passed in the opposite direction to us, brought her out of her torpor. Mlle. Herminie did not like negroes, and at each meeting she said disagreeable things about this one. Yet the black face of the young man had a kind of good humor on it, and you might have said that he kept a smile ready for us as we passed. Mlle. Her-

minie's hatred was increased by this smile, and one evening when a block in the traffic held us up near the negro, she said to him shamelessly, "You didn't clean yourself up this morning."

"No, it was too cold," he replied, smiling broadly.

His voice was harmonious and he had no foreign accent. I pointed this out to Mlle. Herminie, who refused to agree with me, and replied harshly, "One would think that you preferred him to Clément."

She made an excuse for her hastiness, but at the same moment I understood that the negro's face was as pleasant to me to see as any other amiable face.

The heavy colds put a stop to Mlle. Herminie's outings; but I always came back to her with the same pleasure. The care I gave to her made me forget all that had upset me during the day, and I desired nothing more than that she should be content.

It was not the same with the poor old lady. Her face scarcely showed any emotion when I arrived, and I soon perceived that the long hours of solitude were little by little affecting her faculties.

One evening, she said to me in confidence, "I'm fifty-three years old to-day."

She bent on me a look so changed that it frightened me. For a whole week, she repeated, "I'm fifty-three years old to-day."

Then she forgot my presence. While I was speaking to her, she went out on to the landing to listen for my footsteps on the staircase, or else she opened the window to try to see me coming in the distance, and

often with vague eyes and a listening ear, she murmured a childish round —

"Reviens, reviens, c'est l'heure
Où le loup sort du bois." [1]

Soon she refused to eat, and she went out into the streets half-dressed. She had to be taken to an asylum.

Clément was getting more and more anxious about Mme. Dalignac's debts. He spread before her papers covered with figures, and said, "You don't earn more than your workgirls."

"It's enough for me," replied Mme. Dalignac.

It seemed to me that Clément looked at her with a little contempt at those moments. One Sunday, when we were alone for a moment, he lost his temper.

"Her debts mount up and mount up. . . . She's running her business badly, and she won't change," he said.

He struck the papers, then he shrugged his shoulders, and said, "You see, Marie Claire, my aunt doesn't love herself, and when people don't love themselves they never get anywhere."

I ventured to defend her.

"She manages to make a living for thirty workgirls," I said.

He became impatient. "Nobody obliges her to," he said. "Let her make a living for herself first of all."

[1] "Come back, come back: it is the hour when the wolf comes out of the wood."

And he threatened to have nothing more to do with the workshop's accounts.

However, he came with us on the following day to Quibu's. His presence made Mme. Dalignac bold, and she maintained her prices as I had never seen her do before.

The buyer replied politely first of all, with his usual air of condescension; then he became firmer, and as she did not yield, he became hard and said insolently, "Is it you who have the trouble of selling your models?"

Mme. Dalignac would not have colored more deeply if she had been accused of theft. She had that shrinking of the shoulders which I knew so well, and all was finished. On the way out, Clément sided with the buyer.

"*He* doesn't leave his share to others," he said. "And I'll do the same when I'm my own master."

And as we were walking quickly, he made us slacken our pace, and added, "You must always pull the covers your side."

I sought Mme. Dalignac's eyes, but did not meet them. They were looking gayly and kindly on her nephew.

"You'll become rich, you will," she said to him. And her pretty laughter made the passersby turn round.

On each of his visits, the landlord, who received only small installments of his rent, said to Mme. Dalignac, "You'll finish by tiring my patience."

She was lost in confusion, although she had given her last halfpenny: which embarrassed her very much while waiting for the payments of the firm of Quibu.

The landlord did not look a bad man. He was about fifty years of age, and his too black hair shone as brightly as his boots, and his mustache was too shiny also.

Duretour made fun of his clinging jacket, and Bergeounette, who had nicknamed him M. Pritout, said that he looked like an old piece of furniture on which a pot of varnish had been allowed to fall.

Listening to them, Mme. Dalignac laughed and became calm again. She was convinced that the abundance of work would give her the means to free herself rapidly from all her debts. And seeing her so tranquil, I convinced myself that nothing serious could threaten her.

M. Pritout's patience soon tired, and legal notices began to arrive. Mme. Dalignac scarcely read them. She struck them on a nail with other papers of no importance and forgot them immediately.

Clément, who read them attentively, was frightened by them, and asked Mme. Doublé's advice. But Mme. Doublé did not give any advice; she contented herself by reproaching her sister-in-law and renewing her offers.

She came in one Sunday morning, with a bold face and a resolute voice.

"We must come to some understanding about this partnership," she said.

And at once she brought out a square of white card-

board on which she had written in black letters: "Doublé–Dalignac Sisters."

The expression of tiredness that spread over Mme. Dalignac's face was so real that Mme. Doublé lost a little of her arrogance, and said in a less harsh voice, "I'll pay your debts and we'll return the machines to that Jew."

Mme. Dalignac remained silent. As often happened to her at moments of great emotion, she seemed to have lost the use of her voice.

"It's in your interest," went on Mme. Doublé. And without losing a moment, she explained her plans for dividing up the rooms of the flat.

"The cutting-room will remain here, but the workshop will become a fitting-room, in which I'll have a door leading from my rooms to yours."

She rose to explain her meaning and to point out the spot she had chosen; and, with a large piece of red chalk, she drew on the wall the shape of a large opening.

Clément had listened without saying anything, but, when he saw Mme. Dalignac carefully wipe out the red marks, he began to speak.

He told his aunt how her pretty models were given the front place in the windows of the big shops; he had noted their high prices, and he thought it unjust that so much toil and skill should only benefit others; while in the partnership, Doublé–Dalignac Sisters, he foresaw quick and certain profits.

"You know how to work," he added, bending affec-

tionately over Mme. Dalignac. "Mme. Doublé knows how to sell. . . . Between you, you could make a fortune."

For the first time I saw Mme. Dalignac make a movement of revolt.

"Don't insist, Clément," she said. "It's useless."

Clément did not insist, but with one movement he broke the French chalk into three pieces.

Mme. Dalignac picked up the three pieces, which she tossed mechanically in her hands.

"Doublé–Dalignac Sisters," she said. She laughed a little and then threw away the pieces.

"No, I don't want it," she said firmly.

It was Mme. Doublé's turn to remain speechless. She rose with a violent movement, and returned to her own room.

Mme. Dalignac breathed more freely; and suddenly, all her tranquillity returning, she embraced her nephew.

"Have confidence, Clément," she said. "I've plenty of courage."

Accompanying me up the avenue, Clément said to me, "I had counted on her to set me up, but I can quite see that I must give up that idea." And he took my arm as familiarly as if we were already married.

He often accompanied me afterwards. Our conversations differed little. They were always about a shop to be taken and the work we should do.

"From my master's customers," he said, "I'm choosing those who will become mine." And he stopped to write a name in his notebook. On another leaf of his

notebook, he made a list of all the articles he would ask his aunt for, to set up our house. I was shocked by this.

"But she needs those things," I said.

"So do I," he replied. Then he told me what articles I should have to ask for myself.

I refused. He was astonished at my resistance, and said to me almost annoyed, "I thought you were more intelligent."

Meeting the negro became another subject of dispute between us. No more than Mlle. Herminie, could he bear the sight of the poor boy, who, however, refrained from smiling when Clément was with me. But one evening when he thought me alone, his mouth opened wide and fresh, and his eyes rested a moment on mine.

Clément, who was only a few yards behind, said something insulting which made the mouth close abruptly and the eyes turn away.

I was displeased and hurt, and, on the following day, on perceiving the young negro, I felt remorseful, as if it had been I who had given offense. He gave me no smile, although I was alone. Sadness had drawn a kind of very gentle veil over his black pupils.

"I have red blood too," he said to me as he passed, "and my hands are not dirty."

I had a new friend. Perhaps she was already in my room in Mlle. Herminie's time, but I had not noticed her until after the latter's departure. It was a fly. Quite a little fly, clean, dainty, quick and confiding.

As soon as the stove was lit, it came out of its hiding-place, and made its music heard.

"Good evening, little fly," I said to it.

It flew from my head to my hands, or else it turned untiringly about the lamp. But it was at meals that it kept me company especially. Everything that was on the table served to amuse it. It passed over the glass of water, climbed up the loaf of bread, and balanced on the points of the fork. It disdained the crumbs that I placed about for it, and preferred to search about the table-cloth for things to its taste. Sometimes, it came to inspect what I had on my plate. Making first of all a tour of it round the edge, it then advanced cautiously, tasted, shook its head as if to say that there was nothing good there, and returned to the table-cloth, where it ran about in every direction. Sometimes, it seemed to be pursuing a prey. It rushed forward at such a pace that it overshot the mark. It then made a sudden backward movement, and, after a few wild jumps, it seemed to be enjoying a delicious dish. I looked at it very closely. I even took Mlle. Herminie's spectacles to try to see what it was that was such a treat to it, but I saw only its slender proboscis which it plunged into the threads of the cloth, and its round head, in which the eyes took up by far the greatest place.

Its dinner finished, it smoothed its wings for a long time, rubbed its legs carefully, and stood quietly on the book I was reading or on the paper on which I was writing.

One evening in May a heavy, heated smoke entered the workshop like a squall.

"It's a fire!" shouted Félicité Damoure.

Immediately, all the workgirls rose. Gabielle, who had followed the others, looked out of the window.

"It's the sawmill opposite that's burning," she said leisurely.

There was no danger for us; the sawmill was somewhat withdrawn from the avenue. It was only necessary to keep the windows closed as a protection against the smoke. However, as there was a large quantity of wood in flames, and the wind blew them in our direction, the firemen began to pump water over the entire front of our house.

"Cover the materials," said Mme. Dalignac.

And she herself began to pile up the pieces of material, while Bergeounette helped me to pick up the work which the frightened girls had abandoned. During this time, Gabielle, with her sleeves turned up very high and her skirt rolled round her hips, mopped up the water that entered in spite of the shut windows. And every time that she saw flaming wood fly into the air throwing out a rain of sparks, she laughed aloud, and said, "Well played, Mr. Fire."

Mme. Doublé had hastily sent away her workgirls. Her room looked out on the courtyard, and did not even receive the jet from the pumps. But she was afraid, with a fear that made her stupid and humble, and had caused her to take shelter with us. She remained near the door without daring to go out or come in, and her

terrified air changed her so much that Duretour jostled her, and Bergeounette said to me, "She couldn't even return a smack in the face."

Every time that the flames mounted higher or that the smoke increased, Mme. Doublé recovered a little of her voice to say, "It will all catch."

According to her, the neighboring houses would catch fire, ours as well, and the whole quarter would go up in flames. The workgirls looked at her, ready to believe, but Bergeounette reassured them.

"Don't listen to her! She's only an idiot who's afraid," she said.

She went from one to the other; her step was as firm as her voice, and her movements were like orders.

Bouledogue, a clean duster in her hands, was polishing the nickeled wheel of her machine.

Mme. Dalignac did not stir, but nothing escaped her quiet eyes. The fire was becoming rapidly less, and the smoke began to disperse.

In our house, the firemen were going up and down inspecting the damage done by the water. One of them, a young sergeant with a fresh face, entered our rooms. He sat down familiarly on the flap of a sewing-machine, whence he could see the heart of the fire, which reddened in the coming darkness.

"It could not hold out long," he said to Mme. Dalignac, "all the nozzles worked well."

He laughed when he perceived Gabielle standing near him.

"I didn't know there were such pretty nozzles in

Montparnasse," he went on gayly. He laughed again and Gabielle did the same.

Both stood looking at each other and laughing; then Gabielle's face suddenly became serious and troubled, and she bent down to look for something on the floor that was not there.

Other firemen entered. A big blond had his breeches, which were torn at the knee, sewn up, and a little dark man demanded help with his sleeve, which held to the shoulder only by a thread.

The needles had to be forced into the wet cloth, and for half-an-hour there were broad jokes and noisy laughter. But on their departure, the young sergeant was the only one to say au revoir.

We did in fact see him again. On the following day, when the girls left work, he was on the opposite pavement, as if he had been told to look after the ruins of the sawmill.

"It's for me he's come," said Gabielle to us.

And she immediately became transported with joy. She waited, however, until he had gone away before she went down. She did the same on the following day, but on the third day, when she saw him approaching our house, she lost her head.

"How can I escape him?" she said. And she begged us, Bergeounette and me, to tell the young man that she was no longer employed in the workshop.

It was to me that the fireman addressed himself.

"Mademoiselle. Tell me, the pretty girl. . . . Doesn't she work upstairs any longer?"

He looked so honest and so anxious that I took no notice of Gabielle's injunctions.

"Yes," I said, "but she leaves late because she's afraid of you."

"Afraid of me!" he exclaimed. And his anxiety seemed to increase as he went on. "But it's because I want to marry her that I'm trying to speak to her." He laughed and added, "There's not one of my mates has a wife so beautiful."

And immediately he gave me his name and address.

Gabielle was not so glad as we hoped at this news. She at once forgot all the happiness she had conjured up, and thought only of her adventure at the Bal Bullier.

"Before all," she said, "he must know the truth."

And in spite of Bergeounette's shrugs, she wrote a letter in which she told very simply the story of her misfortune, and in which she confessed with the same frankness the love which the sergeant had inspired in her.

Several days passed; then Gabielle, who watched the avenue, perceived one evening the young sergeant leaning against a tree some distance off. She blushed violently, and turned towards us a little to say, "He despises me like the others."

And quivering all over, she implored me to go for the answer.

"You would do better to go yourself," advised Mme. Dalignac.

"Oh, no!" replied Gabielle. "If he touched me

only with the tip of his fingers, I feel that I should be lost."

I, too, was eager to know the reply, and, as I took the letter which the fireman held out to me, I asked, "Are you still decided to marry?"

"No," he said.

I went off so quickly that he had to run a few paces to catch me up. People passed between us, while he repeated, "Excuse me, excuse me, mademoiselle."

I stopped. He stood abashed before me; then anger made him raise his fist, and a flood of red passed over his face while he explained.

"You understand?" he said. "Her fault would be soon known; my mates would laugh at me, and nobody would respect us."

He suddenly seemed to me as wretched as Gabielle, and I left him without ill-will.

For a whole week, Gabielle laughed in a way that made us look at her each time it was heard. Then one evening she stayed behind again to say to Mme. Dalignac, "I should like to speak to Jacques about our marriage."

XVIII

The seizure of her furniture surprised Mme. Dalignac like a catastrophe. She consulted her books attentively, compared her expenses with her earnings, added up the sums she owed, and understood at last that she had made a mistake in counting only on her courage and her goodwill. She understood at the same time that her workshop was about to be destroyed, and that her girls would be out of work. Then she accused herself of negligence. And at the thought that all was lost by her fault, she covered her face with her hands and wept.

Clément was dumfounded by the bad news. In spite of all, he had held to the hope that his aunt would prosper. And if he did not weep as she did, he too covered his face with his hands.

When he was calmer, he tried to find a remedy for the evil in the house. He found no other than the Doublé–Dalignac Sisters partnership. He recalled Mme. Doublé's words: "I will pay your debts and we'll return the machines to that Jew." And what he said afterwards was so just and so reassuring for the future that Mme. Dalignac was convinced and gave way.

Her tranquillity was not of long duration, for the next day she regretted her promise.

"With her," she said in anguish, "I shall never be able to do anything well. When she is near me, it seems to me that she is shutting the door of my brain, and that she keeps the key in her pocket."

Other torments came to harass her. What would become of Bouledogue and Bergeounette? She knew quite well that neither would enter the workshop next door. Then she saw herself alone in the rooms that had been always so noisy. She imagined the communicating door opening at any moment to allow Mme. Doublé to pass with her demands. And before the unpleasantnesses which the Doublé–Dalignac Sisters partnership was about to bring to her, she lost courage and said, "Oh, dear! Oh, dear! How difficult it is to live!"

Her grief did not diminish. Mme. Doublé, who could no more hide her joy than she could her anger, increased it by her familiarities and advice, and Mme. Dalignac's beautiful face faded quickly.

An idea occurred to me. The amounts which our old customers had not paid more than covered the few thousand francs owed by Mme. Dalignac, and if we could collect this money all would be saved.

Mme. Dalignac refused to try this means.

"Not one of those ladies would consent to pay for a worn-out dress," she said to me.

However, on the day on which she was to sign the deed of partnership, her grief became so keen that I set off with the invoices without heeding her.

The first customer on whom I called was very astonished, and promised to write to Mme. Dalignac. The

second laughed very much, and recalled her maid, who returned sulky and furious to push me outside. The third said, "I never heard of such a thing."

I went from one to the other, and was received with the same regrets or indignation, but I was not discouraged. Cost what may, I must have money. I had kept to the last the heaviest sum of money, and my hope grew. The customer lived in the best part of the Champs-Elysées, and she bore several names and titles that Duretour had transformed into Mme. de Thingumbob.

The chambermaid disappeared with the invoice, and returned saying that her mistress was out. My confidence was so great that I determined to await the return of the rich customer. I waited a long time, so long that the silence suddenly frightened me, and that I perceived that it was dark in the vestibule. I became anxious about the time, and I moved in the hope of making some one come. Almost immediately I heard footsteps, and I recognized the voice of Mme. de Thingumbob asking, "Is that dressmaker still waiting?"

There was a buzzing in my ears, and before it had stopped the same voice went on, "Send her away then."

Outside, I stood as though stunned. The tall electric lamps dazzled me with their light, and I did not know in which direction to turn to get back to the Avenue du Maine. I wanted to sit down on a bench to try to straighten out my thoughts, but a fear of myself started me off again.

It seemed to me that my thoughts turned round in my head with a frightful speed, and that nothing henceforth could stop them.

On my return, I found Clément and Mme. Doublé sitting one on each side of Mme. Dalignac. Both had red faces like people who have spoken a good deal, but although Mme. Dalignac was still pale, I was surprised to see that her face was no longer contracted, and that on the contrary it had upon it the reflection of a great contentment.

Her eyes rested only a moment on the invoices I held in my hand. She made a movement of the hand towards Clément that I did not understand. Then she took the pen, dipped it twice in the inkwell, and signed the paper that was before her.

Outside in the avenue, Clément informed me with tumultuous joy that his aunt had given her signature willingly because Mme. Doublé had promised to advance the money necessary for the opening of an upholsterer's shop. And as I did not rejoice with him he said to me unpleasantly, "She's not to be pitied. Mme. Doublé will know how to make her rich."

It was not possible to shut immediately the garment-making workshop, as Mme. Doublé desired. The contract with the firm of Quibu had to take its course until the exhaustion of the models, which would not happen until the end of the year, and we were only at the beginning of October.

Mme. Dalignac, however, warned the workgirls, in order that those who wished to leave immediately

might do so. But they all decided to remain till the end.

"Hé! pardi! we're not in a hurry to be badly off," said Félicité Damoure.

Roberte wriggled about a long time before saying, "I'm not *consummated* with desire to go to another mistress."

Bouledogue desired above all to possess a machine which would permit her to work at home and look after her grandmother.

Duretour talked about getting married at Christmas, and Bergeounette had made up her mind to do anything rather than return to her husband.

Mme. Dalignac paid attention to what each said. She loved them, and it made her suffer to separate from them. They were there, with their different characters, good or bad, sad or gay, silly or intelligent, but all of good courage and hard workers.

There was the beautiful Vitaline, who reminded you of a well-cut diamond. Her hair and eyes shone, her teeth shone. Her complexion shone, and when she moved she seemed to throw light on her companions.

There was Julia, who in the evenings was a super in the theaters, to earn the money to buy patent boots and kid gloves. The boots, which she wore too small, tortured her feet, and the gloves, which she wore too tight, deformed her hands, but for nothing in the world would she have changed the size of either article.

There was also Fernande, who lunched on three lumps

of sugar in a glass of spirits, because she lost each Sunday at the races the little money which she earned during the week.

There was, too, Mimi, the orphan who was not yet sixteen, and who was supporting her little sister.

And in the farthest corner, at the spot where there was least daylight, there was the beggar. She was as dim as Vitaline was bright, and she had a way of looking at you which was like an outstretched hand. Her whining voice often made the others snub her. And Bergeounette, who detested her, accused her of holding out one hand in front and the other behind.

One day when she lingered behind at the hour of noon, I could not bear her imploring face, and with a rapid movement I passed her my purse containing several francs. She went off immediately, but instead of going out by the usual door, she crossed the cutting-room, where I heard her stop for a few seconds.

I followed her, and I was about to ask Mme. Dalignac to be so kind as to pay for the meal which we took together at the restaurant, when she said to me, "You pay for me to-day, for I'm penniless."

The anxious gesture which I made caused her to look at me more attentively. I blushed then and she also. Our eyes remained in contact, then, as though a sudden light had illuminated the road which our two purses had just taken, we were seized by violent laughter. It was like a wave of gayety that threw us right and left. The clear, light laughter of Mme. Dalignac

burst forth and scattered, while mine, hearty and sonorous, followed it and accompanied it everywhere.

Our lunch was composed of laughter and dry bread on that day. And the beggar, who still had on her return the sad look of people who are hungry, could have believed, seeing us so gay, that our repast had been copious and choice.

On Sunday afternoons, when Mme. Dalignac was free, I dragged her away to the Luxembourg Gardens. She sat down for preference in the places where her husband had sat, and like him she watched the crowd pass.

We met there Gabielle and Jacques, with their children. Jacques did not stand up much straighter than he did before, but Gabielle carried her new pregnancy in such a way that it was difficult for passers to be unaware of it. She was no less proud to walk between Sandrine's little boy and little girl, whom she had been able to restore to their father. Little Jacques called her mother, and scarcely left her. He was a pretty child, who was scared by the slightest jostling, and he refused to go far away, while little Sandrine mingled with every group, and could always find her parents again.

Oh! how she resembled her mother, did little Sandrine. The same silken, curly hair, the same eyes that seemed to inform you that you could count on her. She was only eight years of age, and already her little face had a serious expression on it.

Jacques was all admiration for his daughter. He took her hands, as he had formerly taken Sandrine's, and he said to her in a voice full of emotion, "Dear little one."

Watching them, Mme. Dalignac forgot her troubles. She thought of them still when the little family had gone, and she said, as if to herself, "That Jacques —"

As for me, it was the change in Gabielle that surprised me most. She seemed so happy with her husband, that I ventured to ask her in confidence, "Do you love Jacques now?"

"Yes, I love him," she replied quickly. And immediately she added proudly: "He, too, loves me."

Bouledogue made a passing appearance in the garden. She confided her grandmother to us with a glance, and was off as quickly as possible to the Avenue de l'Observatoire.

Then Clément joined us. I saw him coming from afar. The upper part of his body retained much of its freedom, but there was something, I could not tell what, that made him heavy below. And he always made me think of a tree that had moved without taking from the earth any one of its roots.

He sat by us, but although he took up a lot of room on the bench, his remarks on the passersby were never ill-natured or boring.

The autumn was mild. The sparrows, stuffed with seeds, left the bread that was offered to them, and the pigeons, perched alone or in groups in the trees, seemed like big, ripe fruits ready to fall from the branches.

Around us the leaves fell one by one, without haste or noise.

At dinner-time I accompanied Mme. Dalignac and Clément to Rose's. These Sunday evenings spent in the family circle never left me a regret. Eglantine embraced me like a very affectionate sister. The children received me with glad cries, and Rose, fresh and bedecked, seemed to me more beautiful than the most beautiful flowers of the Luxembourg. She too received me affectionately. She was not very flattered to have me for a sister-in-law, but she liked me because of my resemblance to Eglantine.

I had always heard the talk of this resemblance without paying the least attention to it. But this evening, because Rose insisted on making comparisons, a curiosity came to me, and I looked into the mirror that reflected the whole family around the table and showed me my face.

I was first of all stupefied at my paleness, and I had the impression of having seen myself for the first time. Was that mine, that face with the features so regular that they reminded me of lines drawn on white paper?

No, I did not resemble Eglantine, whose complexion was pinky, like her sister's, and whose forehead was very high. Her thin cheeks had, indeed, the shape of mine, and her chin a similar dimple, but her eyes, blue like mine, reminded me of Mme. Dalignac's. And if her too heavy hair also fell about her on all sides, its shade was more uniform and much lighter.

It was to her eyes that I returned especially. They were so calm and gentle that you turned your own away from them with some reluctance. The light entered deeply into them, and you might almost have said there was daylight behind them.

In the hope of finding that mine were like them, I tried to see them in the glass, but I could not find them. I seemed to see in their place two wide-open windows at which some one was leaning.

Mme. Doublé did not wait for the shutting down of the workshop before compelling her sister-in-law to create some models and to fit her customers. It was so much extra toil for Mme. Dalignac, and it left her excessively depressed and overwrought. The day's work finished, she refused to eat, and remained huddled up on a stool, instead of lying down in the *patron's* easy chair.

At bedtime, she said, "I'm so tired that I'm too lazy to go to bed, and I want to lie beneath it like a dog."

She, who had never been ill, was now suffering with pains in her back. Her fine body, which had been so straight, bent as she worked. Then, with her elbows on the table, she said to me as an excuse for this rest, "There are moments when I feel tired to death."

Mme. Doublé was not tired; she had never seemed so active. Her deed of partnership in hand, she compelled Mme. de Thingumbob and the others to pay their back debts. She knew what was necessary to say for

that, and the amount thus obtained grew from day to day.

Mme. Doublé recognized that this money did not belong to her, but she put off a settlement until later. For the moment it served to pay the landlord and to make the necessary advances to Clément for his upholsterer's shop.

Clément was not at all grateful to her for these advances. He received them as his due, and refused to give a receipt for them, on the pretext that she had not yet taken a penny out of her pocket, and that he was quite as able as she to make his aunt's old customers pay up.

Mme. Doublé agreed with him, but she was hurt by his insolence, and she revenged herself on Mme. Dalignac by reproaching her with her past negligence. She even went so far as to assert that the *patron* had lacked care and attention for want of this money. And for the tenth time perhaps, she repeated in the loud voice that was habitual to her: "Oh! Poor brother, it was a woman like me he needed!"

I thought she was going to break out violently as on the other occasions, but it was in my direction that she turned suddenly, and said, "I don't like being looked at in that way."

I lowered my eyes, for I was convinced that I should never be able to look at her in any other way.

To furnish his shop, Clément took from Mme. Dalignac everything that it was possible for him to carry away.

"I'll take that," was all he said to his aunt.

She laughed to see him so loaded, and, noticing my confusion, she said quite happily, "Let him alone! Let him alone! What's mine is his."

Clément replied to my reproaches by saying, "She'll let others take them; it's just as well if I have them."

There was no question of our future lodgings. "The shop-parlor, will suffice," Clément had said. And in two other sentences he had indicated the position of our furniture. "Here a bed to sleep in, and there a table to eat from."

This shop-parlor was damp and dark. The sun had never entered it, and it had an odor that compelled me to leave it immediately. Clément laughed so loudly at my repugnance that in the end I did as he did.

Nothing put him off. He washed the wall, scraped the floor and decorated his shop without accepting any advice.

In the evening, seated comfortably between his aunt and he, he spoke of his hopes of wealth, and made plans for the future. Now that he had a shop he wanted a country house. And frequently, with a map of the neighborhood of Paris spread out in the lamplight, he followed with his pencil the course of the Seine or the Marne, seeking for a pretty spot that was easy of access. He forced me to follow with him, and said, "Choose for us a lovely spot."

I soon tired of seeking. My thoughts flew away far from the Seine or the Marne, towards a countryside that I had long chosen, and where I should have wished

to live always. It was a hill all covered with pink heather and called La Rozelle. It was also a narrow river full of white pebbles called La Vive. It was again a great wood of pines that held their own against the wind, and of which the larger trees had at their foot a round of dry sand, where you could sit down and await the end of the rain. In this country, there was a dog who came and slipped his cool muzzle into the palm of my hand; and just by the side of the river, in a house wide open to the sun, there was a man of about thirty years of age, with attentive eyes, and a face that seemed made of gentleness and goodness.

The fifteenth of December was drawing near. It was the date fixed for our marriage, and Mme. Dalignac was already busy with the last preparations. However, before solemnizing this great day, she was absolutely bent on repairing to her husband's grave. She had been obsessed by this idea for more than a week; but as she felt really ill and the Bagneux cemetery was a long way off, she had a sort of fear of going there alone.

I asked nothing better than to accompany her, but it would be necessary to arrange for the girls' work during our absence, and we had already so much to do in the course of the day that it was impossible for us to do more.

Clément, whom no difficulty embarrassed, advised us to work late and to set out on the following morning before the arrival of the girls. This was, in fact, the only means that would permit us to be away together,

and Mme. Dalignac decided to use it that very evening. Once again she had counted only on her courage, but, as she had come to the end of her strength, she had to give up at the beginning.

It was not the same with me. Three days only separated me from my marriage. I was in a feverish state, which prevented me from feeling fatigue, and the night passed without my perceiving the length of time.

Towards five o'clock in the morning, as I was finishing the preparation of the work, a noise of trailing clogs came up the avenue. A second followed, then others, and soon the sound of wheels thumping against the setts mingled with the noises of the clogs.

I did not remember having heard this noise before, and I opened the window, and looked out. It was the road-sweepers who were coming out of a hut near at hand, where they had been to fetch their cleaning tools. The men were pushing barrows loaded with shovels and pipes, and the women carried several brooms on their shoulders. They all walked slowly with a heavy gait, as if they were already tired by the day's work to come.

Horses yoked to tumbrils next debouched from the neighboring street. They, too, advanced slowly. Their iron shoes rang hollow on the roadway, and beneath the enormous lassitude that seemed to weigh them down their backbones caved in, and their bellies approached the earth.

I shut the window when they had disappeared beneath the distant lamplight, but it was impossible for me to keep quiet.

In order not to awaken Mme. Dalignac, whom I heard moving and complaining in her sleep, I went into the workshop, where it soon seemed to me that I was disturbing the rest of the machines. As I passed, one of them let fall a drop of oil. The wheel of another turned twice as I brushed against its belt, and two or three gave out loud cracks although I was some distance from them.

I returned to the cutting-room, and I tried to sleep for a few minutes on the table, as at the time of the heavy nights of work, but it was not sleep that came to me; it was the memory of a scene that made me detest Clément, and that the sweepers had made me forget an instant.

The evening before, while he was preparing to carry off the *patron's* easy chair, as well as three of the best stools, Mme. Dalignac had detained him to borrow a small sum of which she had immediate need. Instantly I had seen Clément's features harden and his pupils become fixed. He had put down his burden ungraciously and counted one by one the silver pieces, ringing them on the table, then, taking up the chair and the stools, he had said shortly to his aunt: "You won't forget to return that money to me; it's mine."

Mme. Dalignac's fine eyes seemed to melt away to nothing. She nodded an affirmative, trying to smile; then she rose to help her nephew, who had some difficulty in passing through the door with his load, and when at last she had been able to smile, she turned to me to

say, "He's not in the best of moods is our Clément to-day."

My ill-will would not be appeased. I could not banish from my thoughts the fixed eyes of Clément, and it was with no joy that I gazed at my white dress on the dummy.

The rolling of a tram reminded me that we were to start early for Bagneux, and immediately I awakened Mme. Dalignac.

In the main path of the cemetery there was nobody but us, and I was frightened by the noise of our feet on the gravel. Mme. Dalignac walked quickly and passed me by. She advanced with a movement that lifted her up so high that I saw all the sole of her boots.

My fright increased when we had to take one of the cross paths. They were muddy and black, and flowers were rotting on all the graves. Each moment blackbirds rose before us. There were some that were very black, with a quick flight and wings outspread, but others were gray and short, and seemed like winged stones. They disappeared as they had appeared, and there was nothing to indicate where they had gone.

I sat down on a slab of granite, while Mme. Dalignac half lay on the convex stone that covered her husband. She remained motionless, her cheek resting on her arm as on a pillow, and had it not been for the expression of intolerable suffering that disfigured her face, I might have thought that she had gone to sleep.

In this corner of the cemetery, where a great square of ground remained waste, the slightest noises sent long

tremors all over me. The thickets were in motion, and furrows were being traced in the flat grass by creeping things.

All about the graves, too, everything seemed to be alive. A broken stone set on end was like a fleshless head imploring for some sort of succor from above. A tree completely stripped of its leaves stretched towards us its stiff black branches, and in the next pathway a cypress groaned as if it alone had to bear the whole of the damp wind.

Two crows alighted on a white cross. They appeared exhausted, and it was some long time before they could stand upright; but scarcely had they attained the immobility necessary to their repose, when the harsh voice of another crow passing in the distance made them start off again as if in distress.

Mme. Dalignac had also heard the sharp call, and as if she were replying to it, she asked, "What is the time?"

I drew from my blouse the little gold watch she had given to me, and I saw that it was nine o'clock. She started.

"And the workshop!" she said.

I had to help her to her feet. She complained of a great weakness in the legs, and to walk she was obliged to lean on my shoulder. She became anxious at the idea that the girls needed her, but, every time she tried to hasten, her head fell suddenly forward. As we were leaving the cemetery, she stopped me.

"Wait," she said, "I can't see clearly."